Community-led housing: Between ‘right to the city’, ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ and post-pandemic cities

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Abstract
This paper examines the Self-Managed Housing Program (Law 341), in Buenos Aires, Argentina. This programme created 45 cooperative housing units between 2001 and 2020 in consolidated urban areas currently undergoing renewal processes. It investigates the conditions that the programme has generated for the realisation of the ‘right to the city’ in the context of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper analyses the origins of the process and mode of cooperative housing production, including tangible and intangible aspects and capacities acquired by the inhabitants. This study used a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology. The analytical strategy focused on defining a set of dimensions that characterised the self-managed mode of production, conditions of social and urban insertion in the case studied and participants’ perceptions of the influence of material characteristics and organisational arrangements during the pandemic. This paper contributes to our understanding of the socio-economic dynamics in the production of urban space by elucidating the role of the state and specific tensions arising due to bottom-up policies, specific forms adopted by urban experiences of resistance and their contribution in the promotion of concrete conditions of urban life. Finally, this paper characterises an emergent self-managed urbanism and reflects on its possibilities of dialogue with the construction of alternative local policies that challenge growing territorial inequality caused by the subordination of policies to real estate financialisation and its deepening tendencies in the pandemic context.

Keywords
cooperativism, self-management, neoliberalism, right to the city, COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction

This paper examines the relationship between community-led approaches and the ‘right to the city’ by identifying the frameworks of opportunity and limitations that have arisen in the context of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Theodore et al., 2009) and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The community-led production of housing is a cooperative, self-managed approach to producing housing in the broadest sense, including not only the dwelling but also communal areas shared with neighbours, which has emerged with nuances, variations and difficulties during the Programa de Autogestión de la Vivienda (PAV; Self-managed Housing Program) in Buenos Aires (BA). This paper considered cooperative self-managed habitat production as a particular modality within the broader spectrum of community-led housing experiences, encouraging a perspective connecting Global South and North universes, which have not been sufficiently addressed in the literature. This paper revisited the concept of ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 1968) in terms of non-alienated production and access to urban life (Leontidou, 2010; Susser and Tonnelat, 2013), specifically examining access to urban centrality, considering objective and symbolic aspects. This paper sought to contribute to the reflection on the role of self-managed habitat production and how previously acquired community capacities were reactivated during the COVID-19 pandemic, a relevant aspect incipiently investigated.

In conceptual terms, we approach the relationship between community self-management, ‘right to the city’ and ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ based on the complete urbanisation hypothesis, proposed by Lefebvre (1972), with socio-territorial effects (De Mattos, 2010; Rodríguez, 2009). The radical changes that have affected the capitalist accumulation regime since the industrial revolution have conditioned and defined the deployment of an economic, social and territorial dynamic that shattered the old unity of the city and caused a continuous spatial spill over of the urban fabric, which ‘corrodes the residues of agrarian life’ (Lefebvre, 1972: 123) Throughout the 20th century, the entity that had been identified as a city is losing its specificity, giving way to urban society (Lefebvre, 1968, 1972).

Therefore, the conditions required to promote the geographical expansion and
deepening of financialised globalisation of the world economy were established in a process that gradually imposed a new capitalist configuration on a planetary scale (Michalet, 2004). This provoked a profound transformation in the ways territory and population are organised (Harvey, 2007) and redefined the borders and areas in which new centres of capital dynamism are structured globally (Brenner, 2004).

Some authors argue that this is a new process of ‘primitive accumulation’ (Federici, 2015: 317), where privatisation of land and other communal resources, massive impoverishment, plundering and fostering the division of previously cohesive communities are part of the global agenda, heightening more abstract forms of domination that are further from our control (Harvey, 2012). Furthermore, this accumulation expropriates assets and popular knowledge and seizes or cancels the autonomous productive capacity of large social sectors (Ortiz Flores, 2002).

However, international literature indicates that the state continues to be the fundamental driver behind the localisation and relocation of people, resources, activities and institutions in the city, actively organising processes in which low-income working families are dispossessed, while implementing a powerful discursive strategy to reinterpret its actions (Davidson, 2008; Diaz Orueta, 2013; MacKinnon and Cumbers, 2018). Several large cities have consolidated themselves as the axes of the new planetary geography, while uncertainty, instability, new forms of violence and insecurity, deepening of numerous modalities of segregation, excessive expansion of peripheries and new interstitial poverty in urban centres, including property seizures, expensive informal rentals and sublets in slums, and shantytowns, have significantly increased.

The global COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020 exacerbated pre-existing tendencies of segregation and inequality. It highlighted the broad spectrum of inequalities in the social order, including between countries, classes, genders, ethnicities, age groups and the intersectionality created for the reproduction of capital (Pradilla Cobos and Márquez López, 2021). The pandemic spread following spatial hierarchy and locational inequality (Campello Torres and Jacobi, 2020; Florida et al., 2021), with the poorest and those living in the most vulnerable conditions being the most affected (Hudson and Santucho, 2020; Suaya, 2020). The pandemic exacerbated gender inequality, from the division of household labour, with women becoming overburdened, to the increase in explicit material and symbolic violence against women (Cepal, 2020; OGYPPs, 2020).

The pandemic also increased informality, precariousness, wage reduction and a general regression of workers’ rights worldwide (Benza et al., 2022; Fiske et al., 2022; Vicino et al., 2022).

The interaction of economic, social, racial, urban, and territorial inequalities is a powerful nexus. It would be naïve to believe that policies to address the unique conundrums of the pandemic will create greater urban justice without major and specific attention to systemic injustice. (Florida et al., 2021: 19)

Moreover, the pandemic had significant consequences on how we perceive, appropriate and use urban space, challenging many assumptions about the way urban life unfolds (Perelman, 2022). The interaction in cities and the control of space are likely to change dramatically. Alexandri and Janoschka (2020) speculate that we will experience spectacular exacerbated processes of neoliberalisation through gentrification with transnational scales or that the pandemic crisis will offer opportunities for autonomous ways of inhabiting urban territories. Based on the literature on pandemic urbanism, this paper aimed to identify and understand the specific role of organised
collective action in self-managed production of habitat linked to these opportunities for strength social resilience creation of common goods, and associated capacities, which manifest themselves virtually in crises.

Departing from the multi-scalar approach, this paper followed Marxism-inspired critical urban theory in Latin America (Pradilla Cobos and Márquez López, 2021; Rolnik, 2021). This paper sought to identify the specificities that great macro trends of socio-territorial and historical development acquire in peripheral and dependent regional locations, such as in BA.

Access to urban centrality and its relationship with everyday life defined significant strains on the fate of humanity based on the negative consequences of exacerbating socio-spatial segregation and fragmentation, identified and denounced by Lefebvre (1972). The ‘right to the city’ implies a type of socio-political action aimed at recovery integrality of human urban experience, understood as re-appropriating the possibility of inhabiting the city, including daily use and enjoyment, thereby renewing and transforming the characteristics of urban life. For Lefebvre (1972), this implies transcending the mercantile and bureaucratic reasoning, a guiding and significant utopia that ‘politically, cannot be conceived without extensive self-management of production and the enterprise within territorial units’ (184).

Among the rubble of neoliberal urban geography, organisational processes and resistance have emerged in numerous cities, adopting diverse modalities and formats (Garcia et al., 2014; Newman and Wyly, 2006; Rodriguez and Di Virgilio, 2016). Community-led housing production emerged as an alternative to recover the urban commons (Rodriguez, 2009). In the context of capitalist production, community-led urban development represents experimentation with collective forms of organisation based on non-exploitative social relations, where manual and intellectual labour are not split as an organisational principle, as the production process is directly controlled by the workers to satisfy specific social needs (Rodríguez, 2021). Community self-managed production of housing initiated collectively organised processes by its producers and direct beneficiaries, which, paradoxically, interacted with current mercantile and state institutions, constituting an area of material and symbolic dispute (García Linera, 2010; Jeifetz, 2018).

Self-managed production of habitat, in the context of primacy of private ownership of urban land, contributes to the reappropriation of commons (Huron, 2018). According to Huron (2018), commons are constituted from three basic characteristics: resource, community sustained by that resource, and set of institutions designed by that community for its administration. Commons function for the sustenance of daily life by the community that uses them, rather than for profit. Although most research is based on rural experiences, commons production in urban contexts concentrates on three key aspects: (1) constitutive density and heterogeneity of cities, which make them sites of conflict, indicating that ‘urban commoners’ do not share the same cultural framework but are part of the pluricultural and plurinational fabric of the cosmopolitan environment; (2) particular place in the city as part of the process of surplus value generation and capital accumulation, which structurally configures the condition of residential alienation; and (3) the role of the state, including its interaction and incidence in the process of production of urban commons. Urban commons are marked by their density, diversity and close relationship with capital and state. Therefore, urban commons are marked by contradiction.

The unique experience of the PAV, sanctioned by Law 341, in BA, Argentina
illustrates this area of conceptual problems and challenges. Although there are some publications on the cycle (Pedro et al., 2020; Rodríguez, 2009; Zapata, 2017), no results have been published on the housing stage of self-managed cooperatives during the COVID-19 pandemic, which would provide guidelines for other forms of post-pandemic city production.

Methods
This paper utilised a methodology with data collection instruments built to operationalise the material and symbolic dimensions of the cooperative self-managed habitat production processes and their access to the ‘right to the city’. Based on data triangulation, the analytical strategy focused on defining a set of dimensions that characterised the self-managed mode of production, including: organisational arrangements and learning linked to the self-management community cycle, such as mutual aid practices and functioning in committees; conditions of urban insertion in the case studied, including location, particular characteristics of the housing complexes, access to infrastructure, services, and equipment; participants, socio-demographic and employment characteristics; and participants’ perceptions of the influence of material characteristics and organisational arrangements during the pandemic. For quantitative sources, we used a 2018 representative survey of 120 heads of cooperative households, who were inhabitants of housing developments built by the PAV, covering 60% of inhabited housing developments, which was conducted within a consortium research project. For qualitative material, we used 10 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2018 and eight Zoom meetings conducted in 2021 with members of seven cooperatives. In addition, field notes taken by the authors during 2020 and 2021 meetings in cooperative spaces used for experiences such as the Colectivo Hábitat Popular and the Secretaría Latinoamericana de la Vivienda y Hábitat Popular were examined.

BA: Neoliberal city and self-managed resistance
As a result of four decades of neoliberal urban policies, BA was reinforced as the central city of the metropolitan region of BA. It underwent ongoing major territorial transformations through processes of urban renewal and reclassification of the built city that involve its historical and urban centrality (Carrión, 2005; Ciccolella, 1999). National and local governments played a role in this development as managers and enablers. Public intervention was mainly concentrated in Comunas 1, 4 and 8 of the city, where the different forms of working-class housing in BA were historically concentrated (Rodríguez et al., 2013). Limited housing policies were subordinated to the privatisation and deregulation of urban land paradigm, given that no specific measures or instruments were implemented to regulate, produce or create banks of real estate or to capture capital gains to make housing more accessible or mitigate the effects of price increases (Catenazzi and Reese, 2017).

Resistance processes helped set some limits, forcing local governments to develop new strategies and discursive practices. Community-led self-managed housing and housing cooperatives played a significant role, developing and sustaining a process of creating regulations and policies through mobilisation and direct participation in working groups with legislators, where the contents of the regulations were formulated. Law 341 sanctioned in 2000 gave rise to the PAV. This programme, run by the Instituto de la Vivienda de la Ciudad, granted collective loans with subsidised interest rates (between 0% and 4%), and terms of up to
30 years of repayment, to social organisations to acquire land, build new properties or renovate existing ones, and hire interdisciplinary technical assistance (Zapata, 2017). It put the housing production process in the hands of the producers and recipients, enabling an institutional framework of interaction with the state to develop self-management practices.

Four aspects help understand the emergence of this operation. Low-income sectors have produced their own housing on a large scale since the early 1980s by squatting in unused buildings located in consolidated urban areas of the city. Therefore, the first self-managed housing cooperatives were created, aimed at the regularisation of ownership and renovation of buildings, promoted by the Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos (MOI).

The PAV emerged and developed in accordance with ‘bottom up’ self-management experiences throughout the continent and the creation of resistance networks of working-class organisations, particularly Secretaría Latinoamericana de la Vivienda y el Hábitat Popular (SELVIHP). These Latin American experiences set the regional framework that provided inspiration, knowledge and support for these pilot experiences in BA and the subsequent development of Law 341 (Delgadillo, 2014; Loza, 2013; Rodríguez, 2009).

Furthermore, there were continuous contributions produced by interaction between the cooperative movement and public universities, including teams and professionals who, through a network of formal and informal ties, were deeply involved in incubator stages and funding gaps, the development of multiple training devices as well as systematisation and visibility processes.

Moreover, the macro-political context was a structural framework of restrictions as well as opportunities. The 1990s marked the gradual installation of social participation and the right to decent housing and adequate habitat as a significant aspect of institutionalised democracy and response to the crisis of representation resulting from neoliberal policies. In BA, this was expressed by the sanctioning of the local Constitution in 1996, where the promotion of self-management acquired constitutional rank through Article 31. Law 341 was a continuation of this participatory process, which synthesised the cooperative transition of the aforementioned MOI experience and others, which were developed in response to the mobilisation of the population at risk of eviction due to urban renewal projects in the neighbourhood of La Boca, in the mid-1990s. The 2001 crisis fostered the emergence of self-managed organisations, including recovered enterprises, work and housing cooperatives, and working-class high schools, that interacted with the state. Law 341 and the PAV were appropriated by a wide range of organisations, movements, political parties, and squatting and tenant families signing up for the programme.

In 2008, an explicitly neoliberal government took office and froze Law 341, suspending the purchase of land and progressively reducing the budget while focusing on several construction projects. However, by July 2020, the programme’s land bank was made up of 110 properties located in urban renewal neighbourhoods, including La Boca, San Telmo, Barracas, Parque Patricios and Mataderos. Through this, 1261 housing units were built in 45 housing complexes, nine projects were prepared to start construction and 20 projects were in several various management stages (Table 1) (Pedro et al., 2020; Zapata, 2017).

**Housing self-management and ‘right to the city’**

This section presents the characteristics assumed by self-managed production in BA
and its concrete possibility of access to the ‘right to the city’. The 539 housing units involved in the seven cooperative projects analysed totalled 37,269 m², with an average of 71 m² per housing unit, which was well above the 45–50 m² average established for state housing (Table 2).

Self-managed production is linked to the realisation of the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 1968, 1972). First, access to quality urban land with an appropriate location was a key factor. Regarding the insertion of the cooperative complexes into the urban fabric, the respondents (76%) highly valued the location in relation to the rest of the city and possibility of accessing urban centrality. Figure 1 shows that most of the cooperatives, unlike traditional state housing, acquired locational capital (Abramo, 2002) associated with the opportunity structures

### Table 1. Community-led housing production in BA, 1983–2020.

| Self-managed coop. cycles | Prior to Law 341 1983–1999 | During Law 341 | Total | Total law 341 |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|-------|---------------|
| Cooperatives created     | 18                          | 130            | 116   | 682           |
| Land bought              | 6                           | 90             | 29    | 110           |
| Construction projects    | 1                           | 8              | 37    | 46            |
| Completed new housing    | 24                          | 390            | 871   | 1285          |

Source: Own elaboration based on Rodríguez (2009), Zapata (2017), Tejido Urbano (2017), Pedro et al. (2020).

### Table 2. Self-managed cooperatives implemented through Law 341 and PAV, BA, 2020.

| Cooperative                  | Social organisation                        | Number of homes built | Construction completion year | Location                  |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Coop. EMETELE Movimiento Territorial Liberación | 326 | 2007 | Parque Patricios (comuna 4) |
| Coop. Los Pibes Organización Social y Política Los Pibes | 35 | 2014 | La Boca (comuna 4) |
| Coop. Nueva Imagen – Manos a la obra Federación Todos Juntos | 28 | 2016 | La Paternal (comuna 15) |
| Coop. Independencia – Asoc. Civil Sembrar Conciencia | 26 | 2015 | Sal Telmo (comuna 1) |
| Coop. Conciencia | 8 | 2012 | Chacarita (comuna 15) |
| Coop. La Fábrica Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos | 50 | 2018 | Barracas (comuna 4) |
| Coop. El Molino Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos | 66 | 2018 | Constitución (comuna 1) |

Source: Own elaboration based on Rodríguez (2009), Zapata (2017), Tejido Urbano (2017), Pedro et al. (2020).
offered by their proximity to urban centrality or sub-centralities of the more developed northern corridor. Self-managed cooperativism demonstrated resistance landmarks against the expulsive relocation patterns of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Theodore et al., 2009), opening gaps for the realisation of the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 1972).

Second, the prominent role of inhabitants and the higher levels of control of the production process of the urban habitat accounted for the ‘right to the city’ materialising within the framework of this programme. Based on Lefebvrian conceptions (Lefebvre, 1972), this was materialised in the possibility that cooperative members had to recreate their ‘pieces of the city’ through decision-making in the production process of their homes, including location-related decisions, as well as housing size, designs, typologies, construction materials, building method, and cultural profiles printed on constructed buildings.

The interests driving the productive process were guided by the desire to create housing for use rather than for speculation, which resulted in larger housing units and better quality materials and finishes. Zapata (2017) demonstrated that this characteristic, typical of self-managed cooperative complexes, was closely correlated with high levels of social participation, with different modalities and levels of involvement, in the design processes promoted by many projects. The cooperative population played an active role in construction and project decision-making, including managing the selection and purchase of materials. The survey revealed that 70% of the respondents participated in these decisions (Figure 2). One respondent stated,

[...]

Over half of the samples (51%) executed their construction projects by contracting...
and creating work cooperatives, such as the MOI, 31% directly hired the construction trades needed, and 17.5% signed contracts with small construction companies or family members. Nearly half of the cooperative members surveyed (46%) indicated that their organisations included mutual support activities in their work plans or solidarity days as a strategy to save money, reduce costs and maximise the use of the credit provided by the PAV to improve the quality of construction materials. Mutual support and solidarity work practices fostered group integration, developed or awakened skills and stimulated new job creation. For instance, 50% of the women who worked for pay at the Movimiento Territorial Liberación (MTL) construction site were working for pay for the first time (Figure 3).

Third, winning the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 1972) implies effective access to material and symbolic attributes of urban

Figure 2. La Fábrica cooperative (MOI). Buenos Aires, 2017. 
Source: Photos by Camila Moro. Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, December 2017.

Figure 3. EMETELE (MTL) cooperative. Buenos Aires, 2013. 
Source: Photographs by Kaya Lazarini and Cecilia Zapata. Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, May 2013.
centrality, basic infrastructure, health care, education, as well as cultural and communication services.

Most respondents (90%) were very pleased with their new housing. Among the most valued aspects, good ventilation (93%) and natural lighting (96%) stood out. These were important for this population due to their past experiences with poor living conditions in tenements or boarding houses. The improvements in their quality of life were reflected in the fact that 100% of the cooperatives were connected to the main water supply system and had fully equipped bathrooms (with hot and cold water and bathtubs) and gas mains installation (in addition to the size and quality mentioned above). Furthermore, 76% had Internet access at home, which was a key service for remote school education and teleworking during the confinement imposed by COVID-19, and 87.5% had access to cable television. Waste management often affects low-income sectors. In the present paper, 90% of the respondents said that they had daily waste collection and designed internal collection systems in larger complexes (Table 3).

This sample was an impoverished, low-income, precarious, and informal working population, who had previously lived in boarding houses, tenements, or squatted real estate. Among this population, 35.8% were employees, 40.9% were self-employed, and 5% were cooperative members (Figure 4).

The most frequent jobs among women were related to domestic or care work, such as nursing, home care workers and therapeutic companions, whereas among men, jobs in construction, masonry, maintenance and security and as street vendors were common. The majority (81.5%) worked in the private sector, with some respondents

**Table 3. Access to urban infrastructure and amenities for daily life. BA. 2018.**

| Infrastructure and amenities | Total % |
|-----------------------------|---------|
| Main water supply           | 100     |
| Fully equipped bathrooms    | 100     |
| Mains gas supply            | 100     |
| Internet access in home     | 76      |
| Mobile                      | 98      |
| Cable or direct TV          | 87.50   |

*Source: Own elaboration based on Rodríguez (2009), Zapata (2017), Tejido Urbano (2017), Pedro et al. (2020).*
working in the public sector (14% at the national level and 2% at the municipal level). In April 2018, 38% of the sample earned an income of less than 8300 pesos (the minimum wage as of January 2018 in Argentina was 9500 pesos). Slightly more than half of those surveyed (53%) had informal or precarious labour situations (no social security or pensions). Therefore, cooperative members were part of the social spectrum negatively affected by neoliberal policies and were continually subject to pressure aimed at their expulsion from the city as a consequence of the speculative processes of real estate financialisation, the constant increase in land prices and increased rental costs (Rolnik, 2021).

The last issue we examined was related to gender. Federici (2018) revealed the patriarchal order was made invisible by capitalist development, in which women were assigned reproductive tasks through a sexual division of labour. This unequal assignment of roles was exacerbated by the poverty and exclusion generated by the evolution of neoliberalism, leading to the ‘feminisation of poverty’ (Tortosa, 2009). This was also expressed in a feminisation of social organisation. Women assumed a key role in the management of collective and community strategies of subsistence as well as resistance (Massolo, 1995). The community-led production of housing has been an ideal area for the appearance of women in the dispute for the ‘right to the city’. ‘While my husband was working, I was advocating for our housing’, said a cooperative member of the El Caracol cooperative, which forms part of the Federación de Tierra, Vivienda y Hábitat. Moreover, the survey revealed a high degree of feminisation among the heads of household (70%), and the interviews confirmed that it was mostly women who occupied management and administration positions and worked commissions (Rodríguez and Arqueros, 2020).

However, 44% of the female heads of household surveyed earned an income equivalent to the minimum wage compared to 28% of their male counterparts, which placed them around the poverty line. This economic precariously of women did not constitute an impediment to accessing the PAV, as they did so through collective legal status (the cooperative) and within the framework of decommodified processes to access housing, which would be an impediment to accessing traditional state housing operations (Rodríguez, 2009).

Furthermore, the triangulation between the feminisation of social organisation and the development of collective self-management practices enabled the construction of new spaces in which to socialise, where new meanings and stories were co-produced (Rodríguez and Arqueros, 2020), taking weight in the post-pandemic city. For instance, communal facilities were built to socialise domestic and care tasks and sustain mutual support practices during construction. This contributed to changing the subjectivities of the participants, generating denaturalising effects on gender inequalities. In addition, they were key instruments for upholding daily life during the preventive and compulsory social lockdown (ASPO) imposed by the government due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Self-managed cooperatives during COVID-19**

During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, there were 45 completed cooperatives and 1261 families living in their self-managed housing units. Our analysis confirmed that these experiences created an organisational background due to the characteristics of self-managed organisation, which made it easier for the people living in these cooperative communities to
resolve the daily needs of their members during the pandemic restrictions and post-pandemic challenges. Five aspects emerged from the analysis.

(1) *The possibility of having suitable and beautiful*\(^{15}\) *housing was a foothold of resistance*

The characteristics of the housing complexes built, with their spacious dwellings, community facilities and serviced infrastructures, which gave concrete expression to the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1972), provided the cooperative members with the conditions needed to confine more comfortably and have access to adequate hygiene and care.\(^{16}\) The physical conditions to deal with the pandemic confinement of this group strongly contrasted with those in rented rooms in boarding houses or tenements, as well as difficulties of the families living in city slums.\(^{17}\)

(2) *Having shared ‘savings’ and their communal use in an emergency was significant.*

We observed creative and efficient ways of mobilising resources that had been generated as part of various permanent and daily saving practices developed by the cooperative organisations, including raffles, *polladas* (the sale of Peruvian style fried chicken), *cuotas ahorro*, in which members paid a monthly sum into an emergency fund for the cooperative, ice cream sales, cooperative fixed instalments and setting aside surpluses generated through self-managed work planning. This construction, collective, and autonomous management capacity and management of certain community and working capital functioned as a ‘savings cushion’ during the pandemic crisis, creating a much different picture from indebted and isolated families (Federici et al., 2021).

(3) *Coexistence, community and care were observed in self-managed cooperation.*

Positive intangible effects arose from communal and organisational bonds under the principles of self-managed cooperation. The management capacity acquired during the confinement was expressed in small but significant actions that contributed to the development of daily life, such as help in carrying out online procedures, support for obtaining subsidies from the national government for emergency, managing collective claims to utility companies and subtle network of sharing among families. One of the interviewees recounted the effects of the community coming together during the pandemic crisis:

The pandemic was key to think about what life is like in a cooperative. There was often a quarantined or infected neighbor and there is a support network, and that really makes a difference. [...] At the beginning of the pandemic, people were in survival mode; we didn’t invite anyone, we shut ourselves in. But then, there started to be cases in the cooperative and that gave rise to collective care. There are neighbours who are nurses or health workers, and they gave us very valuable help whenever we had doubts... and everyone, each one in their way was contributing, with the paperwork, the schooling of the children. [...] Also having common spaces outdoors was a respite... Here, we went through the confinement in a different way, being able to drink with all the protocols but in a common space, which is there to inhabit, I think it was key.... And also, for example, in the organisation we started to buy food supplies collectively... This had a direct impact on the families’ economies... Interesting things to think about in community life [Coop. La Fábrica (MOI). BA. 2021].

In addition, living in community for years, exercising collective organisational practices, consolidated another capacity, which came into play in the context of the emergency.
For the cooperative network was collectively discussing coexistence, including conflicts and cultural risks. This local community capacity was enhanced by specific mechanisms and areas that supported carrying out daily life activities.\(^{18}\)

(4) Centrality was an enabler of community daily life.

As shown in Figure 1, the urban centrality of most of the cooperatives facilitated the daily lives of the families. The proximity and easy access to centres providing food, medicine, transportation, school and public health infrastructure guaranteed the ‘right to the city’ for the cooperative families and, in the context of confinement, facilitated the supply in local stores. This locational capital in a pandemic scenario contrasted sharply with other low-income sectors confined in traditional peripheral state housing.

(5) Computer literacy deepened self-managed cooperativism.

Among the organisational resources deployed in the pandemic by the self-managed cooperative movement, in addition to the already existing WhatsApp groups, people received an accelerated education in computer literacy linked to streaming tools. This allowed intra- and inter-cooperative meetings and assemblies to be held between cooperative federations, with national and international organisations aimed at progressing the fight for community-led production of low-income housing.

**Conclusion**

This paper has analysed the relationship between community-led housing and the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 1968) in BA, which exists in a context of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Theodore et al., 2009), to reflect on the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically modified the way in which urban space is perceived, appropriated and used, creating and recreating new ways of developing urban life (Alexandri and Janoschka, 2020), challenging traditional ways of individual life and the logic of dispossession that the new post-pandemic city will impose. We foresee that the return to ‘normality’ and the recreation of new forms of financialisation of cities will impose new displacements, which will assume transnational forms of gentrification, as well as new resistance turned into renewed claims for the right to the city, fuelled by the oppositions and disputes developed during the previous decade (Alexandri and Janoschka, 2020; Lees et al., 2018). In this new scenario, cooperative and self-managed living lays solid foundations for the materialisation of access to the ‘right to the city’ for low-income families in privileged locations and decent living conditions as well as their contained forms of community life, providing more respectful and comprehensive ways of inhabiting common space. This has laid the milestones for pilot experiences in post-pandemic cities. In fact, the present analysis demonstrated the capacity of community resilience of families and individuals who experienced self-managed production during the pandemic. This resilience found resonance in material aspects, institutional arrangements and forms of community interaction learned and established in the previous trajectory of self-managed habitat production, which was activated due to the challenges posed by the pandemic.

We empirically questioned the scope and limitations of the PAV community-led housing programme. Community-led housing production has shown a broad capacity to produce urban commons, including cooperative groups inhabited by communities,
managed jointly, with transitory housing programmes that constituted experiences of cooperative life prior to the definitive groups. These commons exist in dispute with other sectors for the appropriation of the urban externalities offered by centrality, specifically in neighbourhoods subject to urban renewal. Through the direct administration of resources by the cooperative organisations, at-cost production and financing of professional work that accompanies the process, the cooperatives were able to independently and sensibly direct the use of these common resources towards low-income sectors neglected by state housing and the market, obtaining significant material and socio-cultural results. Moreover, this capacity for agency strongly demonstrated the potential benefits of a self-managed popular economy. This modality of production is characterised by orienting all capacities, material, work, cognitive and affective, in the creation of the housing; however, it is also a concrete example of access to the right to the city in Lefebvrian terms (Lefebvre, 1972), that is, in terms of recreating a city tied to the needs of its users over the needs of capital accumulation.

However, the capacity for agency of community-led production requires the state, recreated in its institutional designs and formats, and public policy to grow and to support, to train all actors in the system, and to provide territorial coverage and criteria of universality. The state must use its power to oppose the management schemes of public–private monopolies of poverty welfare administration, as a mechanism of neoliberal governance that seems, in a post-pandemic scenario, to expand as a modality towards the poor, unemployed, surplus population of the labour markets.

The evidence identified two critical aspects for the future of popular sectors in large global cities in post-pandemic stages. On the one hand, there is the restriction of access to land in large cities due to the new dynamics of financialised real estate, driven by the transformations that cities experience after the new forms of appropriation and use that the pandemic created. On the other hand, the significance of granting access to urban centrality to low-income sectors and how it facilitates their daily lives was highlighted.

Although the neoliberal restructuring of the development model imposed by the pandemic crisis will take on new forms than were seen with previous systemic crises, evidence asserts that this will translate into new forms of real estate accumulation; therefore, it will bring with it new forms of gentrification, which will assume new transnational (Alexandri and Janoschka, 2020) and planetary (Lees et al., 2018) scales. These new scenarios of dispossession evidently envision few possibilities of access to the ‘right to the city’ for the most impoverished city sectors. Furthermore, as argued by Lees et al. (2018), these new forms of dispossession are accompanied by new global forms of resistance, in which we believe the cooperative self-managed production of housing is inscribed. The pandemic starkly reinforced our conviction of the validity of a self-managed future based on collective ownership, mutual support and a comprehensive approach as political and ideological axes for building more democratic cities, conceived in terms of the common good.

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Notes

1. These dimensions have been examined in other publications (Rodrı́guez, 2009; Zapata, 2017). We worked on the development of the concept and its appropriations and uses; however, here, we are interested in highlighting the key aspects raised by Lefebvre (1968).
2. We apply analytical axes collectively discussed in the framework of the project ‘Social Production of Habitat in metropolitan areas of the Global North and South: policies, institutions and social mobilization’, Ref.: (PID2019-105205RB-100), AEI:10.130.139/501100011033, Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (Spain). We explore a co-learning approach that involves social organisations members’ feedback along a longitudinal research process involving successive projects (Alterhabitatat, 2022).
3. Conducted within the framework of the ‘Alternative models of housing development programmes in Buenos Aires, Argentina’ project, funded by Johns Hopkins University and led by Dr. Valeria Procupez and Dr. Carla Rodrı́guez.
4. Conducted within the framework of the Consortium Project mentioned above. All participants gave their written informed consent to participate in the study.
5. Conducted within the framework of the project for strengthening and dissemination of interdisciplinary programmes, titled ‘Centrality, public action, and social organisations: Self-managed production of habitat in the autonomous city of Buenos Aires’, funded by University of Buenos Aires and led by Beatriz Pedrowhere authors participated as senior researchers.
6. Buenos Aires is administratively divided into 15 comunas (communes). Each comuna encompasses one or more neighbourhhoods: 1 (Retiro, San Nicolás, Monserrat, Constitución, San Telmo and Puerto Madero), 4 (Barracas, Nueva Pompeya, La Boca and Parque Patricios) and 8 (Villa Lugano, Villa Soldati and Villa Riachuelo).
7. ‘The City recognises the right to decent housing and adequate habitat. To this end: (1) It progressively resolves the housing, infrastructure and services deficit, giving priority to people in the sectors of critical poverty and with special needs of scarce resources. (2) It sponsors the incorporation of vacant properties and promotes self-managed plans, urban and social integration of marginalised inhabitants, recovery of precarious housing, and regularisation of ownership and land registry, with criteria of permanent settlement. (3) It regulates the establishments that provide temporary lodging, excluding those that conceal rentals’ (Constitution of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, Article 31).
8. This crisis was expressed in the social, political and economic outburst of December 2001, including social mobilisation of the population and resignation of president Fernando De La Rúa.
9. Hundreds of companies that went bankrupt after the 2001 crisis were occupied and run by workers (Ruggeri, 2014).

10. Mauricio Macri took over as mayor of the Government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, representing the Pro Party (Republican Proposal).

11. In state housing, the state maximises profit by minimising housing sizes, increasing overcrowding and reducing construction quality.

12. These housing typologies are typical of the low-income sectors in Argentina and are characterised by informality and precariousness in the way they are accessed and inhabited.

13. Although we are clear that gender is a socio-cultural construction that goes beyond a binary classification, for the purposes of this text, we only analyze the reality of women in relation to their unequal relationship with men.

14. We used qualitative material from 10 semi-structured interviews and eight open meetings conducted via streaming during 2021, with participants chosen via theoretical sampling criteria (women and men of different generations and cooperatives previously included in the sample survey), who gave their informed consent. This material is also relevant to the objectives of the ‘Colectivo de Organizaciones de Habitat Popular’. Videos were edited and published for pedagogical uses and dissemination purposes, within the framework of the Project ‘Centrality, public action, and social organizations: Self-managed production of habitat in the autonomous city of Buenos Aires’, funded by University of Buenos Aires (Pedro et al., 2020).

15. Beauty refers to a spatial expression that provides adequate shelter and meets the needs of inhabitants’ daily lives, ranging from the intimate sphere to different nuances of private, community, neighbourhood, urban and public expressions. Inhabiting condenses this multiplicity, and architectural programmes whose material expression was designed in interaction with its users, materialised under the control of producers and appropriated as inhabitant subjects that fluidly channelled this complexity. The nuances and diversity of daily life is what we call attractive housing.

16. This was verified with transitional housing programs self-managed by cooperative members.

17. Follow-up statistics evaluating COVID-19 indicated that infection and mortality rates in informal neighbourhoods or settlements far exceeded those recorded in formal neighbourhoods. The accelerated advance of COVID-19 in these neighbourhoods was associated with the impossibility of sustaining preventive isolation for prolonged periods of time in overcrowded and shared housing situations (Suaya, 2020).

18. For instance, MOI has the ‘Construimos Jugando’ kindergarten, which is a space with an integral approach to early childhood education.

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