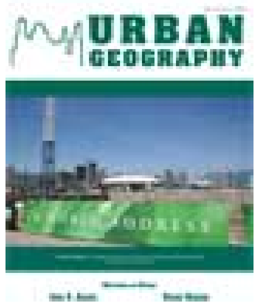

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Middle-class struggles against high-rise construction in Buenos Aires. Urban democratization or enforcement of particular interests?

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ABSTRACT
It is a relatively new phenomenon in the context of urban development in Buenos Aires that citizens from the middle class have been increasingly claiming empowerment in local decision making. In this paper, we analyze the spatial-political outcome of protests against high-rise construction and demolitions of the urban heritage in Buenos Aires. Based on a frame analysis, the results of the paper show that the citizens' initiatives under study have been able to incorporate several key issues into the agenda of the public debate: the relevance of the urban heritage, the negative effects of market-oriented municipal politics, and deficient citizen participation. Moreover, the controversies surrounding high-rise constructions in the 2000s and early 2010s disclose a clear degree of politicization. A permanent struggle for primacy in municipal policy models has been sparked, in which victory and defeat alternate, and attention is drawn to more fundamental societal issues beyond urban development.

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Middle class; high-rise construction; urban development conflicts; urban social movements; radical democracy

1 Introduction

Worldwide, urban development has become exceedingly characterized by the struggles of different social groups against neoliberal politics. However, compared to research on the outcomes of social movements in general (e.g., Bosi, Giugni, & Uba, 2016; Giugni, Mc Adam, & Tilly, 1999), studies focusing on the prevailing impact of urban activism are rare. In Buenos Aires and many other Latin American cities, this is particularly true for the spatial-political impact of middle-class protests. While scholars frequently study contestations of marginalized groups, investigations remain scarce with respect to younger middle-class movements with the exceptions of, e.g., Azuela and Cosacov (2013), González Bracco (2013) and Kanai (2010).[1] This research gap is also related to the fact that middle-class activism in cities such as Buenos Aires has emerged only recently.[2] In order to analyze this phenomenon, we studied the protests against high-rise projects and demolitions of the urban heritage in traditionally middle-class quarters of the Argentinean capital between 2006 and 2013 (following the city's ultimate stage of

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construction growth; 2003–2012). In the neighborhood of Caballito, which is used as an important empirical illustration in the present paper, successful resistance was initiated in 2006 to serve as a model for many other subsequent initiatives.

In order to fill the identified research gap, the paper focuses on the following two questions: *Which dynamics of politicization and depoliticization and prevailing emancipatory practices can be uncovered in the frame of urban middle-class activism?* In this context, a second question arises: *Which political, social and spatial conditions govern the struggles against high-rises in Buenos Aires and their outcomes?* With these research questions, the study follows the empirical quest for new democratic openings for cities (Purcell, 2013) and underlines the importance of Latin American cities as a rich laboratory for identifying new modes of emancipatory dynamics. Therefore, we take a careful look at the daily contentious routines that go beyond single projects and the conventional interpretations of empirical reality (Featherstone & Korf, 2012; Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006).

To provide answers, the study deduced an analytical framework for urban development conflicts on the basis of Rucht and Roth's (2008) approach to the conditions and outcomes of social movements. This approach has been adapted to the analysis of Bueno Aires using key arguments from postpolitical (urban) theory (Purcell, 2009; Rancière, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2009) (Section 2). The methodology section then describes the applied frame analysis (Section 3). On this basis, we present the empirical results with respect to the conditions, as well as the discourse dynamics and spatial-political outcomes, of the struggles against high-rise construction in middle-class neighborhoods in Buenos Aires (Sections 4 and 5). The paper ends with critical remarks on the transference of radical democracy to urban development (Section 6).

2 Analytical framework for the spatial-political outcome of urban conflicts

This paper adapts Rucht and Roth's (2008) approach on the outcomes of social movements to the analysis of urban struggles in the postpolitical city. Correspondingly, our analytical framework differentiates between four condition levels – (1) political opportunity structures, (2) triggers of conflict, (3) internal conditions of urban social movements, and (4) interaction dynamics – in addition to (5) two outcome dimensions (see Table 1).

(1) Political opportunity structures include the openness/closedness of political institutions, the consensus/dissent of elites, the existence/nonexistence of allies, the democratization level of a society, and the capability as well as willingness of a state to repress (Rucht & Roth, 2008). In order to explore the modes of governing that affect the political opportunity structures of protest movements in Buenos Aires, we particularly relate to the depoliticizing logics of urban neoliberalization. According to Swyngedouw (2009), the neoliberal city is characterized by pro-growth and market orientations as well as global restructuring and local elite networks (Logan & Molotch, 1987). In terms of the city's postpolitical order, Swyngedouw (2009) and Rancière (2004) postulate that technocracy, which tends to supersede political disputes and the involvement of civil society, is the most powerful consensus-creating governmental technique. The multilayered concept

Table 1. Spatial-political conditions and outcome of urban conflicts – analytical framework.

Outcome conditions		
Political opportunity structures		• Political culture (elite networks, neo-populism, technocracy) • Planning culture (technocratic/communicative) • Governance rescaling • Social movement scene
Trigger of conflict		• Transference from internal to external attribution
Internal conditions of urban social movements		• Action strategies • Framing logics
Interaction dynamics		• Interplay of mobilized social groups • Action and framing strategies of other actor groups
Spatial-political outcome		
Master frames		• Contesting OR consensual frames?
Discourse practices	Emancipatory OR consensus-creating	• Change of spatialities (place, scale, territory, networks) • Transformed political practices of government levels • Institutional outcome

Authors' own

of populism, which is as deeply rooted in Latin America as technocracy, has also been considered a consensus-creating and authoritarian model (Weyland, 2003). An erosion of democracy is further assumed by processes of governance reorganization, i.e. upscaling, downscaling and outsourcing imply that not democratically legitimized entities increasingly decide over politically relevant issues (Jessop, 1997; Purcell, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2004). In addition, Latin American scholars have pointed to the weakening effects of communicative planning tools (Souza, 2006) and informal policies such as corruption and clientelistic networks on social movements (Zibechi 2012).

(2) The triggers of conflict refer to all factors of the political and social environment which prompt the mobilization of social movements or individual subjects. In the frame of this condition level (the "general level" in the works of Rucht and Roth (2008)), the moment of transforming individually perceived injustice (such as quality-of-life impairments due to market-oriented urban politics) into a collective stimulus of acting is particularly crucial. Such transformation requires the transference of a problem or a part of the political order from internal to external attribution. According to Rancière (2004), this process of subjectivation occurs when those ignored by an existing social order, i.e. the *sans-parts*, become active and start to rearrange space.

(3) In order to capture the internal conditions of protest movements, particularly the framings of claims and actions (Rucht & Roth, 2008), our study considers the structuring properties of scales, places and networks and how these spatialities are used strategically; this is when we speak of the *politics of* scales, places and networks (Leitner et al. (2008, p. 159). Relevant politics of place include the use of symbolically charged places for demonstrations and the production of identity-establishing places. Politics of networks allow social movements to assert spatiality-related added value, as it acts across spaces and possibly passes hierarchical orders (Mayer, 2013). Nicholls (2009) highlighted the different functions of networks by interlinking them with Granovetter's (1973) strong and weak ties. While geographical places may support strong ties that are necessary for delicate actions

requiring strong trust, multiple contact points foster weak ties, which are useful for the creation of common frames and information circulation.

(4) The analysis of the level of interaction dynamics between involved actor groups is linked to the internal conditions and political opportunity structures (Rucht & Roth, 2008), and thus relates to both presented concepts, the postpolitical city and spatial contentious politics. In this light, this analytical dimension mainly takes into account the role of power relations between actor groups beyond the citizens' initiatives as well as their action and framing strategies. Within this process, actor groups make specific use of the framing logics that underlie their framing strategies (cf. Section 3). These logics reflect the crucial institutional spheres of modernity – scientification, legalization, moralization, and estheticization – and can explain the dynamics of the discourse. Certain communicative strategies elaborated by collective actors serve to delegitimize competing protesters and to create public consensus (Rancière, 2004); for instance – as our case study also shows –, when government stakeholders play off judicial aspects against moral arguments or when a topic is treated as a political issue and moralization is discounted as obstructive (Brand, Eder, & Poferl, 1997).

(5) Finally, we studied two outcome dimensions in the context of a possible (re-) politicization of urban governance: (1) master frames (Benford & Snow, 2000), and (2) a typology of spatial-political discourse practices used by conflicting parties to uncover the outcome of the struggles against high-rise constructions (see Table 1). Beyond that, the principle of antagonism and counter-hegemony (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 2005) allowed to "assess" the emancipatory content of the conflict outcome. This includes the changed patterns of the activists' social-spatial positionality, the contesting character of the unfolded frames and spatiality-related practices, and finally, the political and institutional reactions. In this context, we analyzed to what extent and under which spatial conditions the middle-class initiatives have created counter-hegemonic networks of equivalence; i.e. networks that require the articulation of common ideas and the production of equivalence between different social groups.

3 Methodology

We applied frame analysis (Benford & Snow, 2000) as our central research method. Accordingly, framing is considered to be a strategy for actors to communicate their perception of reality and address other groups, and actor frames can be ascribed to hegemonic and counter-hegemonic visions (e.g., of urban development).

In order to grasp the discourse dynamics and practices, we followed a two-step approach: In an initial step, we identified the actor frames and framing strategies used to implement claims. Within this process, actor groups make specific use of superior discourses and framing logics (Brand et al., 1997) (cf. Section 2). Empirically, we additionally analyzed symbolic narratives in the form of collective storylines within the frames. These storylines serve to articulate and potentially amplify the frames (Benford & Snow, 2000). In the course of this procedure, we also looked at the activists' class positions and focused on the strategic use of politics of scale, place and networks.

In a second step, we detected the dominating frames, i.e. master frames, placed by so-called discourse coalitions of actors who support a hegemonic formation (Brand et al., 1997). The manifestation of these coalitions is related to spatial-political discourse practices, i.e. dynamic institutional practices in a policy field, for example, how residents' claims influence the actions of city officials (cf. Table 1). Changing master frames and new discourse coalitions and practices are not only relevant for the course of a given conflict: They are assumed to reflect the very dynamics of political change.[3]

The reconstruction of frames as well as the discourse dynamics and outcomes of the struggles against high-rise construction and demolitions of the urban heritage in Buenos Aires utilized a variety of different sources and methods. It was based on a media analysis covering various formats between June 2006 and December 2013 (print media such as Clarín, La Nación and Página 12; documentations on YouTube and Facebook). We also used participant observations (in assemblies of citizens' initiatives, public hearings at the city parliament, etc.) and conducted 20 problem-centered interviews for our analysis (carried out between 2010 and 2012, cf. Annex). The interview sample consisted of directly and indirectly involved agents of citizens' initiatives and grassroots organizations, delegates and government stakeholders. Furthermore, we analyzed public documents (urban planning codes, minutes of parliamentary meetings, etc.) to reconstruct interaction processes and institutional framework conditions. The case study focuses on the most active and by then "oldest" neighborhood-based citizens' initiatives and NGOs, which have increasingly set their sights on protecting the urban heritage: SOS Caballito, Proto Comuna Caballito, Proteger Barracas, Salvar a Floresta and city-wide active NGO Basta de Demoler. Correspondingly, such middle-class neighborhoods as Caballito, Barracas and Floresta are at the center of attention (see Figures 1 and 2).

4 The conditions of protests against the construction of high-rises

As of 2003, following recovery from the 2001 economic crisis, Buenos Aires experienced a construction boom that peaked in 2006: The highest values in 30 years were reached, with some 2,800 building permits granted and more than 3 million m^2 of developed floor area (almost exclusively residential) (Ministerio de Desarrollo Urbano, 2011). This process has led to a strong increase in land prices, thus aggravating access to housing for low- and medium-income groups (Baer, 2011). Approximately one third of all apartments built since 2003 are classified as luxury class. Since many apartments serve as capital investments, the vacancy rate increased to 25 to 30% of the overall housing stock, with 180,000 vacant apartments in the high-range price segment in 2010 (cited in Baer, 2011, p. 327). The strongest real estate demand in Buenos Aires is traditionally identified in the residential zones of the northern districts. In the 2000s, real estate developers increasingly switched to the adjacent, so-called western corridor, including Caballito, Flores, Villa Urquiza and downtown Barracas, where relatively large areas have remained available. Between 2001 and 2011, 60% of the construction activities in Buenos Aires were concentrated on six out of 15 communes (some 10.4% were allotted to populous Caballito, 13.6% to Palermo, and 8.1% to Villa Urquiza) (Ministerio de Desarrollo Urbano, 2011). At once, the stock of one- to two-story houses was being demolished at an accelerating speed (Szajnberg & Cordara, 2007).

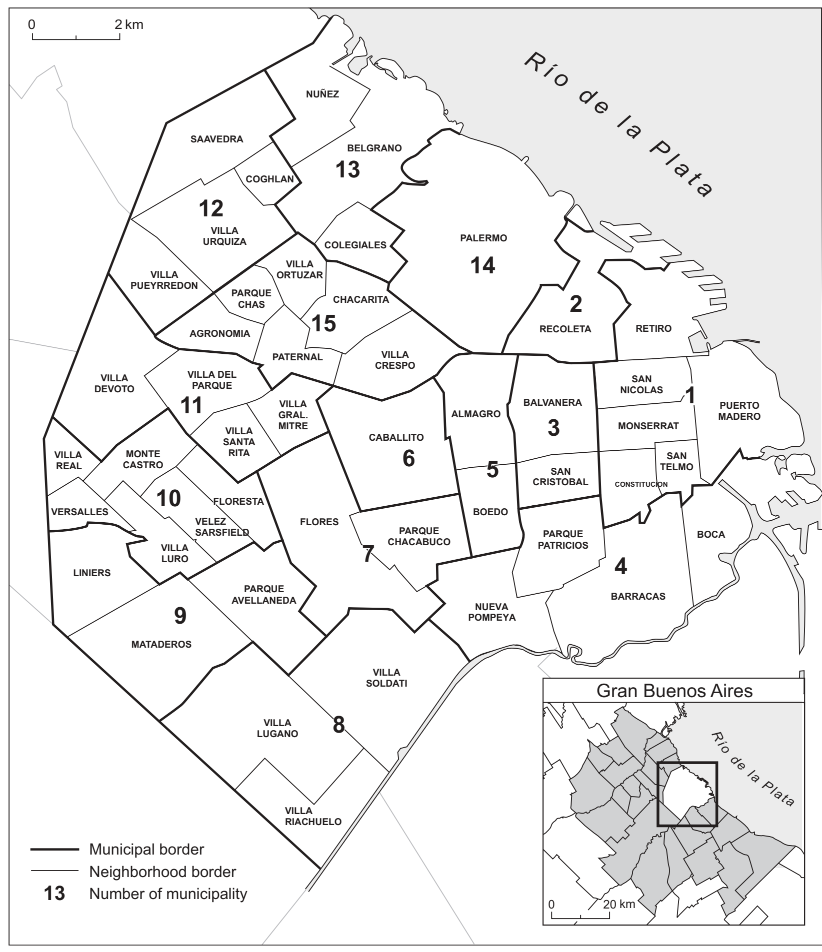

Figure 1. City of Buenos Aires: municipalities and neighborhoods.
Authors' own

4.1 Political opportunity structures

With respect to the condition level of political opportunity structures in Buenos Aires (cf. Table 2), we can sum up different depoliticizing government techniques and tendencies of curtailed democratic participation. Urban development in this city has been marked by powerful political-economic coalitions of interest (Cohen & Gutman, 2007) (see Figure 2).[4] An activist of SOS Caballito reflected on these specific political opportunity structures in the opening sequence of his interview by simply stating: "Buenos Aires is a business". (BP9 76)[5] These power relations have strongly affected collective action, as this spokesperson further explained: "We charged lawyers with consultations and they told us: 'You're fighting against the most powerful, you cannot mess with the economic and political elite. And I, as a lawyer, a lawsuit? Take care of it yourself, look for somebody else'." (BP9 113) Furthermore, due to informal practices such as corruption and clientelism, political steering capacities have become generally deficient in Buenos Aires (Stanley, 2010). Moreover, the neopopulist managerial style

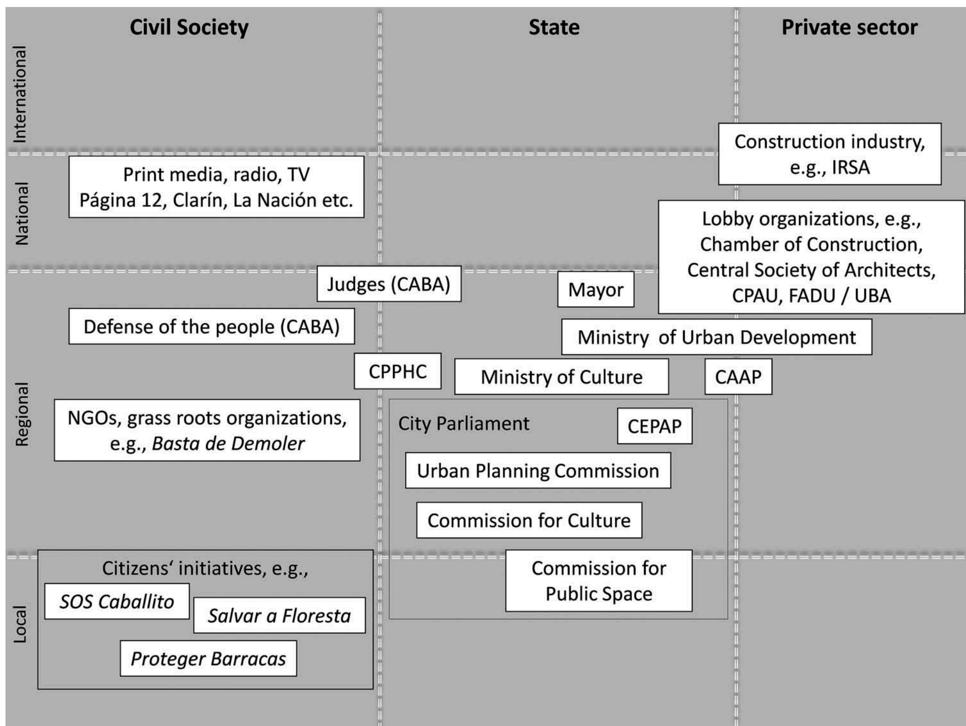

Figure 2. High-rise construction in Buenos Aires – conflict parties.
Author 2015

of mayor Mauricio Macri (2007–2015) (Levitsky, 2003) enforced the depoliticization of the urban order (Fernández Wagner, 2012).

The desire to give the corporate sector free rein has further found expression in a fragmentarily reactive planning system, and not only since the 1990s wave of neoliberalization (see also Author 2015). The planning requirements for massive high-rise construction were set forth by various deregulations of urban planning legislation (Szajnberg & Cordara, 2007). Moreover, participatory elements are rudimentary. As a result, even though concomitant urban-building "verticalization" now meets with increasing popular criticism, political decision-makers show little will for reforms, e.g., to implement a "morphological" urban planning code, actually dictated by Buenos Aires' spatial structure plan since 2008 (Tercco, 2009).

However, in the course of governance rescaling processes and unlike frequently observed (Swyngedouw, 2004), we do not only state depoliticizing dynamics. In the frame of the national reorganization of the 1990s, civil rights were substantially improved in Buenos Aires: Since 1996, the city has had an independent municipal government and directly elected mayor, in addition to its own constitution, guaranteeing new rights to its citizens. These improvements have been accompanied by an altered awareness of citizens' civil rights. For the first time, new local initiatives thus embrace the legislative possibilities to impact urban development (see also Azuela & Cosacov, 2013; González Bracco, 2013).

The citizens' initiatives against high-rise constructions in Caballito and other middle-class neighborhoods have all in all faced positive reactions among citizens' organizations

Table 2. Conditions and outcome of protests against the construction of high-rises.

Outcome conditions			
Political opportunity structures	Political culture		Powerful political-economic coalitions of interests; neo-populist, authoritarian, informal
	Planning culture		Authoritarian; rudimentary communicative elements; reactive; construction based growth paradigm
	Governance rescaling		Downscaling (constitutional reform 1994): municipalities weak, but new civil rights; outsourcing (e.g., housing politics)
	Social movement scene		New openings for cooperation and partial social mobilization
Trigger of conflict	Personal concernment		Affected by high-rises/gentrification
	Urban politics issue		Counter market-based urban development
	Case-specific conditions		Routines of assemblies of 2001 in collective memory
Internal conditions of urban social movements	Action strategies		Contact to media, lawsuits, protective decrees, lobbying with members of parliament, moderate demonstrations
	Framing logics		Technical, judicial; reference to environmental stress, urban heritage
	Social-spatial positionnality	(1) Social class	"The" middle class
		(2) Ethnic belonging	Descendants of European immigrants
		(3) Place	Positive image of neighborhoods
		(4) Financial resources	Medium
		(5) Knowledge	Technical, functioning of party-politics and media (print, TV)
		(6) Networks	Local, regional, national, international
Interaction dynamics	Governing techniques		Authoritarian tendencies
	Framing logics government		Moralizing
	Institutional support		Progressive judges and public institutions
	Media		Often close to economy
Spatial-political outcome			
Master frames	Consensual or contesting?	Government	"Growth is good for everybody"
		Groupings	"Right to urban heritage and local identity"
Discourse practices	Emancipatory	Resistance/antagonism	Achievements via judiciary and parliament
		Knowledge	Professionalization and new self-confidence as citizens
		Networks	Institutionalization and network relations among initiatives
		Place	New identity emerging
	Consensus-creating	Compromises and control	More information & transparency; politics of announcements business as usual (informal practices, laissez-faire)
		Institutional reforms	Modifications of urban planning code
			Creation + abolition of participatory urban heritage institutions

Authors' own

and civil society.[6] However, even though the manifold presence of political mobilization in Buenos Aires is outstanding, urban activism is challenged by a weakening civil society and the prevalent consensus regarding Buenos Aires as a city driven by a construction-based growth model (Ciccolella & Mignaqui, 2008).

4.2 Triggers of conflict

Regarding the conflict triggers (see Table 2), the interviews conducted over the course of our field work indicated that massive high-rise development had resulted in a marked decrease in the residents' quality of life and identity, as it implied demolished historical buildings and increasing congestion, accompanied by substantial property depreciation. The protests of middle-class residents (e.g., in the form of caceroleros, mobilization via the media) were first of all stimulated by the combination of personal concerns and local social-spatial transformations, as the following quote shows: "I have an old house that I restored ten years ago; and one day, I learned that the house next door was to be demolished in order to construct an 8-story building. I thought that this was not possible, but it was, and I realized that it would be necessary to change the Urban Planning Code (Código de Planeamiento Urbano; CPU). That was the origin. I started a blog called 'letter in a bottle' and noticed that it was read." (BP8 2, spokesperson, Proteger Barracas) Besides the loss of property value, the neighbors recognized the risk of culturally and economically induced displacement: "There is an urbanistic dimension. But there is also a cultural one [. . .]. A class conflict related to the idea the long-term residents have of the high-rise dwellers. These seem to be newly wealthy cherishing US American esthetics as opposed to the European esthetics of the old Caballito." (BP16 3–4, sociologist, UBA)

Moreover, increasing critique of the neoliberal urban development model in public debates has proved to be stimulating for protest. For instance, many residents of middle-class neighborhoods not only consider urban heritage to be in danger, there is also growing critique toward the side effects of real-estate development in Buenos Aires: Low construction quality and deficient compliance with security standards as well as related public control frequently lead to collapses and illegal destructions of buildings (González Bracco, 2013).

While in the case of many social movements, protest culture rooted in the collective memory stimulates action, many of the studied groups have acquired protest practices by watching the *asambleas* of 2001,[7] which – in the sense of Lefebvre's (1991) representational space – had left a "karma of participation" (SP16 71, sociologist, UBA) in Caballito, Flores and other districts. Ever since the successful initial protests in Caballito – in 2008, for the first time in history, organized groups of local residents enforced a legal building height limit in the CPU – resistance has accumulated in all traditional middle-class quarters. The best known initiatives having emerged include SOS Caballito, Proto Comuna Caballito, Basta de Demoler, Proteger Barracas and Salvar a Floresta. As a loose city-wide network, they have established a repertoire consisting of organizing demonstrations and local actions, such as neighborhood festivals, ensuring broad civil-society attendance at public hearings, and intervening into urban planning by means of new laws, enforcing protective decrees ("recursos de amparo") or other judicial decisions (see Figure 3). All in all, these observations indicate that collective action is stimulated

Figure 3. Events SOS Caballito 2007 and 2010.
SOS Caballito (n.d.).

when a personal concern is transformed into an external issue – in our case, urban politics (Roth & Rucht 2008).

4.3 Internal conditions of urban social movements

Empirically, we were also able to identify specific internal conditions, which have proved to be pivotal for the effectiveness of the conflict (cf. Table 2). With respect to the frames and action strategies, the initiatives criticized that real-estate speculation solely serves the interests of a small elite and highlighted their civic right to have a say. Initially, many of them focused on addressing individual impairments, e.g., by claiming for "more sun, more space, more green" (see Figure 3). However, in the further process, their frames moved beyond particular interests and the groups started to address the neoliberal logic underlying the contemporary urban development model. They emphasized the deficient construction quality in Buenos Aires and charged the government for omitting its control functions (cf. Section 4.2). For example, media pointed ironically to the "creativity" of urban authorities to "clean irregularities and permit new buildings" (Kiernan, 2013; see also Livingston, 2010). Collective storylines, such as "casa de zapato" (an alteration of caja de zapato [shoe box] which illustrates the monotonous architecture and deficient structure of many newly built apartment buildings), helped to amplify the frame of a strongly commodified housing construction to other organized groups and the public.

Moreover, our analysis reveals an expertise-based counter-framing of the city government's central narrative surrounding "housing needs": Firstly, the mobilized groups emphasized that housing construction failed to address the population groups in need. Instead, it focused on luxury apartments which often solely served as capital investment. Secondly, in dealing with the conflict, depending on the districts' characteristics, references in the local initiatives' framing to environmental stress by means of infrastructure congestion (water, energy, traffic) (especially Caballito) and the urban heritage (e.g., Recoleta, Barracas) have proved particularly compatible with the public. These claims further facilitated a frame alignment (Snow & Benford, 1992) with supporting public institutions (cf. Section 4.4.). Consequently, their framing strategy shows that they had partly clung to particular territorial claims. However, various social groupings increasingly tried to break the hegemonic logics of urban politics and managed to create a public arena for their concern on a city-wide scale.

Spatially, these framing dynamics have found expression in the form of "moderate" demonstrations at symbolically charged locations, neighborhood parties, exhibitions, etc. – as against the street blockades of the lower classes (so-called "piquetes"), which by now are generally lowly accepted by the middle and upper classes. These repertoires, which are typical of middle-class activism in Argentina (Visacovsky, 2009), can be considered a decisive ground work for the activists' lobbying with delegates in an attempt to prepare legal charges to modify the CPU and to convince judges to issue protective decrees to prevent demolitions.

This collective action repertoire is traceable to a robust social-spatial positionality, i.e., the social situatedness (Leitner et al., 2008) of the mobilized groups, as the analysis indicates: (1) As residents of middle-class districts, Caballito in particular, the activists embody the ideal of the Argentinean "middle class", as this quote shows: "Problems in Caballito are problems with the middle class in Buenos Aires. And nobody wants to mess with the middle class in Buenos Aires." (BP13 50, spokesperson, Proto Comuna Caballito) In Argentina, a specific identification potential is indeed inherent in this cultural and political category (Adamovsky, 2009), which has strongly contributed to the creation of a public arena for the contested issues. (2) Moreover, these groupings are perceived as descendants of European immigrants, commonly located in specific districts. We derived from our analyses that social-class affiliation appeared to be particularly essential in terms of critical mass identification with protesters' claims and (3) closely linked to symbolic place attributions and ethnic affiliations (compare Holston's (2011) discussion on differentiated citizenship in Latin American societies). This may have increased the chance to be heard both politically and in public, as this sociologist strongly emphasized: "It is not unimportant whether somebody is from Scalabrini Ortiz and Santa Fe [street names] in Palermo or Acoyte and Rivadavia in Caballito or from La Boca, no!". (BP16 5) (see also Azuela & Cosacov, 2013)[8] (4) Furthermore, financial resources seemed to be of medium relevance. (5) These resources have shown to be limited in the case, yet the citizens, mostly well equipped with educational and social capital, proved able to compensate this situation by way of excellent technical expertise and profound knowledge in dealing with the media: "The functionaries at gatherings believe they can patronize you as the stupid resident who doesn't understand what they're planning to do. They basically concentrate on explaining things to you that often cannot be explained, and they become nervous if you tell them so." (BP12 38,

architect/sympathizer, Basta de Demoler) In this context, the analysis also showed that NGOs such as Basta de Demoler often have associated experts write statements and readers' letters, since the impact would be potentially higher if technical knowledge is articulated by professionals. (6) This resource pattern is finally accompanied by the potential of network generation at various scales (neighborhoods, communes, city-wide and internationally) – a central condition of contentious politics (Routledge, 2003). Empirically, we found evidence that corresponds with Nicholls' (2009) understanding of strong and weak ties at different scales: Initially, the groupings and activists under study established strong ties at the neighborhood level, each consisting of a small nucleus that created strategies, and a surrounding set of supporters (cf. Section 4.4). Furthermore, they developed regional and city-wide networks with other organizations in order to consult each other. Activists in these multiscalar networks increasingly made mutual use of the individual strengths of geographically dispersed groupings, as this quote shows: "They come to our campaigns, we to theirs'. If it's only 10 people, nothing happens, but 50, watch out! The campaign at the Gran Rivadavia [former movie theater]: 500 people. The press came. On Tuesdays, all NGOs meet because of law 3056.[9] Each will discuss what it can contribute to preserve it. [. . .] Basta de Demoler has the capability to prevent demolitions [. . .]. They admire us because of our capability to create [. . .] all the judicial things they need to stop building projects. And Proteger Barracas has the capability to visualize the structure of the *barrio*. They work a lot with local identity." (BP6 36, 32, spokesperson, Salvar a Floresta)

4.4 Interaction dynamics

With respect to interaction dynamics in the course of the struggles (see Table 2), the initiatives have been confronted with authoritarian executive forces who applied moralizing frame logics and populist strategies of action: For instance, "such claims do harm to public welfare", "the city needs more apartments", and "what these organizations are doing destroys our economy" were frequent messages articulated by interviewed government stakeholders.[10] The frame analysis thus shows that the city government has been seen to apply scientific findings (e.g., the housing shortage) in a populist attempt to place political interests as serving public welfare. Furthermore, the state institutions did not only perform with quasi-technocratic arguments. This observation also fits into the obvious link between technocratic and populist "divide and conquer" techniques (see also Weyland, 2003). The city government and construction sector made attempts to reduce the framing of the citizens' initiatives to mere NIMBY interests, as these quotes underline: "Look, I've studied a lot of urban sociology; this is what you call urban selfishness." (BP2 56, Head of Planning, Ministry of Urban Development) and "These are people who want to live in Buenos Aires, but with the structure and taxes of a *country* [~ gated community] in the province of Buenos Aires." (BP19 25, PRO city delegate)

However, in the course of the interactions, the state actors were confronted with institutionalized criticism and public control. In this connection, the rulings of judges played a significant role in thwarting the interests of the city government (see Azuela & Cosacov, 2013), partially compensating for procedural and legal deficits regarding housing and urban planning. Furthermore, according to our study, the setup of a loose city-wide network for urban heritage in Buenos Aires is to be attributed to several supportive public authorities who

claimed for empowerment and urban heritage protection (see also González Bracco 2013). These urban authorities include the Defense of the People (Defensoria del Pueblo) and the Commission for the Protection of the Historical-Cultural Heritage (CPPHC), whose heads have achieved considerable success despite their lack of political decision-making power (by providing expert opinions to judges, informing and calling citizens to participate at city council hearings, etc.). Likewise, many members of parliament at the House of Representatives in Buenos Aires, who belonged to different parties including the close-to-business PRO, advocate urban heritage issues (see Figure 2).

Finally, in connection with elite networks and private-sector self-regulation, the role of the media in articulating urban conflicts is to be emphasized as part of the interaction dynamics, because they represent far more than a mere reflection of public opinion, as already indicated by Logan and Molotch (1987). The eclectic media landscape in Argentina has allowed protest to be voiced in the press, yet strong economic powers in the background affect whether the organizations' claims are indeed reverberated. Generally, the movements' actions have been impeded particularly at locations in the focus of real-estate development. Correspondingly, an interviewed spokesperson of Proto Comuna Caballito emphasized the capability of the real-estate sector to put pressure on the print media: "When protests exploded [...] once, a member of the Chamber of Construction showed me an e-mail on his BlackBerry, which had been sent to all important real-estate companies: Conjointly, nobody should place adds in Clarín for one weekend, as it has attributed too much attention to us. Clarín completely understood the matter. After that, it took me three years to appear there again; and since then, always with negative connotations." (BP13 52)

5 The outcome of protests against the construction of high-rises

5.1 Shift of master frames

The frame analysis allowed us to identify two discourse coalitions around high-rise contestations (cf. Table 2): First, we state common discursive references of citizens' groupings, grass roots organizations and urban authorities whose master frame can be summarized under the claim for "a right to urban heritage and local identity". Adhering to the paradigm of "urban growth is good for everybody", a second discourse coalition unifies the city's executive level, the construction sector and representatives of the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Buenos Aires (see Figure 2). Both make demands on the topic of urban heritage, a contested political field, as the head of the CPPHC emphasized in his interview: "Urban heritage is a conflict-laden field, because this is about power. Those who think that culture is not related to politics don't understand. Since it is about power and by pushing through an almost hegemonic logic over another logic, obviously, there are conflicts." (BP10 3, Head of CPPHC)

In the frame of contesting the definatory power of urban heritage, the successful modifications of the CPU indicate a shift of the understanding of urban heritage from an architectonic good and useful byproduct for tourism to a likewise social construct. Furthermore, citizens' organizations have tried to amplify the class-connoted debate exclusively dominated by experts. However, at the same time, the paradigm of urban growth was stabilized by including urban heritage frames, similar to what scholars state for

narratives such as citizen participation and sustainability (Lederman, 2015). Moreover, the transversality of the topic (Carman, 2006) has facilitated its take-over by the city government, while serving to appropriate the groupings' achievements. Accordingly, the Head of Planning, Ministry of Urban Development, adorned himself in his interview: "No other government before has preserved so much. [...] 15,000 buildings that all can be found on our webpage." (BP2 42)

Overall, in spite of exerting high pressure and pushing through significant institutional changes, the groupings were only able to materialize partial success relevant to planning. The struggles failed to produce a change of thinking among the powerful political-economic elite. Nevertheless, the following results reveal an ongoing fight for the primacy of urban political guiding principles, in which victories and defeats alternate. Consequently, an agonistic conflict space persists – as we call it following Mouffe (2005).

5.2 Emancipatory practices

Via the judiciary and parliament, the initiatives in Caballito and other middle-class areas have achieved a considerable extent of space-relevant success (cf. Table 2). At several locations, district initiatives and city-wide grassroots organizations, especially Basta de Demoler, have enforced decisions with an effect on planning: construction freezes and legal annulments of building permits, building height restrictions by modifications of the urban planning act, protective decrees to control building demolition, and finally provident planning for infrastructural projects.[11] Interpreted in terms of legal space production (see Azuela & Cosacov, 2013), these actions are considered as an affront to the construction industry, real estate management and the municipal government of Buenos Aires. For reasons of enforceability – and less because of particular interests – the citizens' initiatives have focused on territorial segments. It is a permanent struggle, as a delegate explained in the interview: "You take a territory and modify the CPU; we always do fragments." Similar to the conflicts around housing shortage (e.g., Caggiano et al., 2012; Muñoz, 2017), the judges who represent an "anti-Macri position", as a sociologist underlined, (BP16) regard the groupings favorably. Furthermore, an increasing extent of institutionalization has facilitated judicial processes: Besides the Division of Urban Heritage created by the Defense of the People of the city of Buenos Aires in 2009, the General Defense of the city of Buenos Aires established a special technical unit for urban heritage with a proper defense attorney in 2012. These strategies can be considered as a reaction to market-oriented, deregulated urban development, where the judiciary replaces other institutions of the state.

Many citizens have additionally developed a notion of political action and participation once seen as abstract. They have also critically transformed their positionality by way of expertization and spatial-political interaction. As committed laypeople, they have unfolded diverse capacities and knowledge, achieved locally materialized successes, and developed local and extra-local scale relations (Tironi, 2013). Meanwhile, these groupings have replaced spontaneous actions by strategically routinizing mobilization techniques, the communication of information and claims toward the media. Moreover, the relationship between delegates and activists has changed, and common elaborations of solutions were observed. As a consequence, laypeople by now play a decisive role in agenda setting. Correspondingly, a spokesperson of Salvar a Floresta commented on the

incomplete CPU with renewed self-confidence: "Those who break the law, we will oppose; and if the law is of no use, we will change it." (BP6 20)

"If there is something characteristic about this city, then it is multiple organization", the former head of the CPPHC emphasized in an interview. (BP10 25) At the local level, new networks have been established in various districts, thus generating enlivened places and unlocking a high identification potential (Agnew, 2011). Interestingly, the residents perceived these relationships in terms of reactivated neighborhood life, even though it had been protest that allowed this collective perception to evolve into real networks (see also Azuela & Cosacov, 2013). In addition, a larger number of social groupings created a city-wide "Network for the defense of the historical heritage of the city of Buenos Aires", consisting of approx. 60 initiatives and NGOs (2012) which further strengthened attempts to protect the urban heritage of Bueno Aires against the interests of the real-estate and construction industry.

Overall, the controversies under analysis disclose a clear degree of politicization, even though many of the organizations have been marked by particular interests, as this activist quote shows: "We are all happy; everybody has a house whose value has increased." (BP8 27) However, some of the actors' civil-society involvement also extended beyond individual initiatives into the framework of other local spatial conflicts and social classes, e.g., in the struggle for empowered participatory mechanisms (SOS Caballito and Proto Comuna Caballito). This serves to illustrate a certain entanglement of universal and particular claims (Laclau, 2007). Our empirical analyses revealed that these organizations made use of place attributions to continue collective, spatial memories beyond social classes. Thus, the *asambleas* of 2001 as original places and basis for further political action have been reproduced and transformed by the high-rise struggles, or as a sociologist (BP16 71) commented: "Many of those who are involved today, already formed part [of the *asambleas*] back then. [...] And the citizens who fight against the construction of high-rise buildings achieved that something much stronger emerged, which still exists and implies a change. I also think that these urban conflicts resembled a breeding ground."

Furthermore, organizations beyond urban heritage form networks and benefit from one another, comparable to a loosely constituted social movement space (Massey, 2005). Thus, links have been created through common articulations with respect to the construction industry, as this quote illustrates: "We participate [in demonstrations for employment laws] since the claim is the same: Lacking control of the construction industry; it is about fast deals and high profits. Life doesn't count [...]. Meanwhile, we know each other; we are a part of a broader network with a common basis that remains." (BP9 103, SOS Caballito)

5.3 Consensual practices

The principles advocated by the political-economic coalitions of interest (cf. Section 4.1) in terms of "economic growth" and the "free market" were vehemently defended. Accordingly, in order to retain habitual routines, the city government has complemented the authoritarian techniques of governing that are anchored in the logic of municipal politics by consensual techniques (see Table 2). For one thing, the politics of announcement in the sense of "there will soon be a new planning act" was accompanied by a trend

toward a discursive occupation of "participation", reduced to increasingly provided information. Accordingly, the Head of Planning of the Ministry of Urban Development (BP2 28) explained in an interview: "In the course of the paradigm change [due to of the economic crisis in 2001] we do planning with open doors [...]. This also leads to a paradigm change regarding the relationship between citizens and public operatives." He thereby did not only postulate an increase in participation and local democracy, but established a causal relation with the "paradigm change" introduced in the course of the 2001 crisis. Moreover, the interviewee considered himself as part of the 2001 resistance, which fits into the aspiration to create an all-including consensual order (Rancière, 2004).

For another thing, this setting was backed by authoritarian decisions on the part of the city government. In the course of our field work, key persons were dismissed and representatives' decisions concerning planning laws manipulated, thus weakening newly created places. Meeting with broad approval, former mayor Macri considered himself to be particularly authorized in this regard. Amongst others, in 2012, he fired the head of the formerly irrelevant CPPHC who had proved to have an influential position in the Advisory Board for Heritage Concerns (CAAP) by means of preventing demolitions.

This substantiates that the successes of civil society groupings have by no means led to principally questioning established political routines in Buenos Aires. To the contrary, political practices continue in the mode of business as usual; respectively, they have only deepened since Mauricio Macri's was elected president in 2015. A spokesperson of Proto Comuna Caballito compared the contestations with a "game" that always different teams win. Achievements (such as laws) and losses (capping of legal norms, ignoring orders, etc.) alternate. Unsurprisingly, "business as usual" is also the mode under which we could summarize the interactions of the private sector, closely entangled with political actors and media enterprises (cf. Section 4.4). Among others, lacking public control mechanisms are reflected in aggressive strategies moving in legal gray areas (cf. Crot, 2006). The construction industry has frequently used these legal gray areas and until today put pressure on groupings or lawyers in the case of temporary injunctions and other legal achievements (e.g., Kiernan, 2017).

Furthermore, comparable to clientelistic practices in impoverished neighborhoods (Auyero, 2010), subtle government techniques have been applied at the local level (cf. Leitner et al., 2008; Souza, 2006). For instance, the interviews revealed that the municipal government impeded the strengthening of the communes – leading to disillusionment among those who had attempted to become involved (Cosacov, 2010). Accordingly, an interviewed sociologist pointed out that instead, "the logics of party politics have been reproduced at a lower scale [...] and new opportunities for political *punteros* [informal local political leaders] set up". Moreover, especially in Caballito and other communes, urban authorities supported the concerns of conservative initiatives to drive wedges between local organizations. This delegitimized initiatives in public and allowed to verify the NIMBY imputation of "egotistical", "xenophobic" interests for *all* middle-class initiatives. Finally, an appropriation of frames surrounding the urban heritage is becoming indicated in the course of urban renewal in the southern neighborhoods (Rodríguez & Di Virgilio, 2016).

6 Conclusion: transferring radical democracy to urban development reconsidered

The social protest initiated by diverse district initiatives opposing high-rise construction in Buenos Aires can be conceived as particular, territorial resistance. Nonetheless, our empirical results show that the initiatives under study have been able to add several items to the agenda of municipal politics with the support of judicial authorities: deficient civic rights of codetermination, the relevance of the urban heritage, and the negative effects of market-oriented municipal politics. Moreover, a permanent struggle for primacy in municipal policy models has been sparked, in which victory and defeat alternate, and attention is drawn to more fundamental issues, which allows a lasting agonistic conflict space to be identified. Extending beyond local conflict, this process sustainably serves to exert pressure (to change). In addition, the role of non-intended spatial effects is worth noting: Even though the interests of some groups have remained sectional and local, effects on locations and scales can be recognized, as public awareness has evolved in terms of participatory rights and strategic stimuli provided to other movements, in particular, knowledge and network-based tactics with high public visibility. These conditions are particularly relevant today, considering the changes of Argentine national politics since 2015, which only deepened governmental trends at the city level. Furthermore, we also observed the challenge of dealing with signs of fatigue and professionalization pressure that come along with the decrease of emotionally laden mobilizations (Purcell, 2013).

In light of our key findings, one could argue that radical democracy's premise of difference appears to be too dichotomous when applied to urban politics. Additionally, it bears the risk of fixing differences between social groups by assuming ontologically different identities. As Tironi (2013) has stated, laypersons are never only laypersons, as they embrace technical and scientific knowledge, leading to a meltdown of boundaries between citizens and technocrats. The *sans-parts* underlie social change and act both technocratically and politically (although in this study, subjects were not *sans-parts* in the sense of Rancière (2004)). "Technocratization" can indeed compromise open-to-conflict entanglements. However, the empirical insights of this study reveal that radical democracy should put a stronger focus on facing the complexity of the political in empirical reality as well as on contextualizing views, in particular, regarding case-specific hegemonic orders or the politicalness of law. This paper shows, for instance, that substantial responsibilities in Buenos Aires municipal politics have increasingly been placed into the hands of legal institutions over the course of the past ten to fifteen years. Moreover, the relationality of subjects and the relationality of space need to be conceived of to a greater extent. Spatiality-related elements of contentious politics could allow for further differentiations regarding the functions of networks. When social organizations are embedded into multifunctional networks (cf. Section 4.3), we may not only expect specific dynamics. Rather, it seems to be more likely that relations of equivalence (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) provide for differentiated and likewise equivalent interactions.

Against this background, strongly formalized definitions of "the political" need to be questioned that reject civil society activities, such as those initiated by middle classes out of hand because of an assumed "placebo politicalness" (Marchart, 2007). The same is true for the assumption that certain forms of protest solely stabilize a postpolitical order as

they move in the frame of existing orders (Swyngedouw, 2009). With respect to this aspect, one may point out to ethnographic studies commenting that the postdemocratic debate often clings to theoretical interpretations, while contradictory facets of resistance found in empirical reality are ignored and consensus politics-breaking capacities are underestimated (Featherstone & Korf, 2012; Paddison, 2009). Although we may refer to the micropolitics of territorial middle-class activists around high-rise construction as "placebo politicalness", this study reveals that a schematic classification of politically "relevant" and "irrelevant" performances of urban activism is not feasible, even more so as we do not come across the hegemonic order of Western societies everywhere. Considering the deeply rooted extent of individualism in Argentina (Kessler, 2009), it is not marginal when people realize the existing "police order" (Rancière, 2004) and bundle resources to rebel against it. This argument is closely linked to the empirical observation that the outcome of local struggles is not reducible to the local scale (Featherstone, 2005). We would argue that this statement also holds true for citizens' organizations with quite particular interests, though it may often address non-intended spatial-political outcomes.

Democratic openings of urban development can be strengthened, and the outlined socio-political deficits overcome, provided that social movements are able to maintain proactive forms of resistance. For this purpose, organizations should be aware of the hijacking and harnessing of frames and political achievements at the government levels, as the political incentives to stimulate gentrification in Buenos Aires show. Likewise, it is crucial to accept that processes of absorption or exclusion by the (technocratic) system unavoidably take place in the frame of reestablishing what Rancière called the social order (see also Mayer & Künkel, 2012). Resistant dynamics and differences can be maintained permanently only on condition that activists constantly call into question applied political practices and frames. Finally, and although this is rarely observable in the present case, better-positioned organizations should consider it their duty not to push through their concerns at the expense of weaker social groups, but rather to act supportively.

Notes

1. These studies examine, for example, social-spatial and legal productivity, as well as the making of neighborhood identities in the framework of middle-class movements. They reveal the importance of the middle class in shaping institutional and territorial outcomes, whereby the activists significantly trust in the regulating power of law. These are essential findings that function as a starting point for this contribution.
2. The middle class is more than a purely economic category in Argentina. Rather, it describes a historical-cultural model deeply rooted in the Argentinean identity, which particularly relates to a high level of educational attainment (Minujin & Anguita, 2004). According to Adamovsky (2009), it derives its origin from Peronism and refers to the descendants of European immigrants with access to a working welfare state. Likewise, the comparably large proportion of middle-class sectors differs from other Latin American countries (46% in 2003, Galassi and González (2012)). However, in the course of increasing social polarization since the 1990s and related downward social mobility, this model began to crumble due to a massive increase in poverty (around 40% of the population during the 2001 crisis; ibid, 2012).
3. Due to limited space, we cannot present the frame analysis in detail. Instead, we focus on the master frames derived on that basis as well as the related spatial-political practices.

4. In detail, besides the mayor, particularly the minister of urban development, the state secretary of planning, and the president of the Advisory Board for Heritage Concerns (CAAP) play a central role. At the same time, the city government is closely intertwined with enterprises and lobby organizations associated with the construction industry.
5. The numbers of the quotes (translated from Spanish by the authors) represent the respective interviewee and paragraph (cf. Annex).
6. At any rate, the groups made sure to dissociate themselves from the piqueteros scene (lower-class mobilizations with a specific protest repertoire, which originate from the 2001 crisis) (cf. Section 4.3).
7. Assemblies of activists (piqueteros) that strongly function on the basis of direct democracy principles.
8. These neighborhoods are marked by highly distinctive images: upper-class Palermo, middle-class Caballito and lower-class La Boca.
9. The Special Preservation Order (PEPP), enacted in 2007 and renewed on a yearly basis, provisionally preserved all buildings in Buenos Aires constructed before 1941. In December 2011, however, to the dismay of the groupings, it was terminated because of missing votes. In the course of this decision, several delegates were evidently forced to abstain from voting. The authoritarian attitude of the populist government, which felt confirmed by clearly reelected mayor Mauricio Macri, then became particularly apparent.
10. For instance, a city delegate of the ruling business party PRO stated in the interview: "When the city has a housing crisis and more apartments have to be developed, where will I do that, if they want everything to be protected?" (BP19 6).
11. To name some legal changes: In 2007, NGO Basta de Demoler initiated the PEPP to preserve provisionally all buildings constructed before 1941 (cf. footnote 6). In 2008, the first protective decree was achieved, particularly thanks to Basta de Demoler, establishing it as the most common tool to intervene in urban development. In 2008, citizens' initiatives induced a change of the urban planning act (2721/08; 2722/08) in Caballito: For 80 blocks, permissible building heights were limited to three floors. In 2010, Salvar a Floresta carried through the preservation of parts of the Floresta district as Historical Heritage Area (APH). In 2012, Proteger Barracas enforced that special construction conditions (building height, etc.) were reversed for La Boca, parts of San Telmo and a large portion of Barracas.
12. CABA Capital Autónoma de Buenos Aires.

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Annex

Sample problem-centered and expert interviews, high-rise struggles in Buenos Aires

N°	Interview type	Function interviewee	Name of institution	Type of institution	Date
BP1	Group discussion	Spokespersons	*Salvar a Floresta*	Citizens' initiative	03.12.11
BP6	Interview	Spokesperson (Architect, Planer)	*Salvar a Floresta*	Citizens' initiative	03.12.11
BP8	Interview	Spokesperson (Architect)	*Proteger Barracas*	Citizens' initiative	17.12.12
BP9	Interview	Spokesperson	SOS Caballito	Citizens' initiative	18.12.11
BP12	Interview	Architect	*Basta de Demoler*	Citizens' initiative	18.12.11
BP13	Interview	Activist (Communication expert)	*Proto Comuna Caballito*	Citizens' initiative	19.12.11
BP14	Interview	Spokesperson	*Basta de Demoler*	Citizens' initiative	19.12.11
BP11	Interview	Defense Attorney (Geographer)	Defense of the People, CABA	City authority	20.12.12
BP10	Interview	Head (Anthropologist)	CPPHC (Commission for the Protection of the Historical-Cultural Heritage)	City (executive-legislative) Commission	19.12.11
BP3	Interview	Architect	Central Society of Architects (SCA) and CAAP (Advisory Board for Heritage Concerns)	Business association	09.08.12
BP17	Interview	Architect	Former Minister of Culture, CABA	City government	01.12.11
BP2	Interview	Head of planning (Geographer)	Ministry of Urban Development, CABA[12]	City government	18.08.12
BP7	Interview	State secretary PRO	Ministry of Public Space, CABA, until 2011 head of CEPAP (Special Commission for Architectonic and Landscape Heritage, CABA)	City government	16.08.12
BP4	Interview	Delegate	Partido Socialista Auténtico PSA	City parliament	08.08.12
BP5	Interview	Delegate	Unión Cívica Radical UCR	City parliament	13.08.12
BP19	Interview	Delegate PRO	Parliament CABA; Head of Urban Planning Commission	City parliament	09.08.12
BP20	Interview	Scientific Consulter PRO, Architect	Parliament CABA	City parliament	15.08.12
BP15	Interview	Sociologist, Expert	University of Buenos Aires UBA, Social Sciences	University	24.11.11
BP16	Interview	Sociologist, Expert	UBA, Research Institute Gino Germani (IIGG)	University	29.11.11
BP18	Interview	Urban scholar, Expert	Universidad San Martín	University	25.11.11