

## **Gas Service and Development Projects: transforming Domestic Economies in a squatting in Buenos Aires**

### **Abstract**

As a result of the growth of informal settlements nearby Buenos Aires metropolitan area, various development projects are currently carried out in poor neighborhoods to provide basic infrastructure as water, sanitation and energy supply. The logic of these interventions would be to transform informal users into official users of the given services.

This is the case of about ten neighborhoods – locally known as *asentamientos* – in Moreno (on the western outskirts of Buenos Aires) where I conducted my research. In the framework of a development project aimed at bringing a gas infrastructure and domiciliary connections to the service, my attention was focused on analyzing the transformations in the domestic sphere further to the implementation of a gas infrastructure. The project is built on the basis of a “voluntary” membership to the gas network, where the *vecinos* adopting the service are asked to pay for the connection by taking a microcredit which covers the necessary technical work within the plots and houses.

During a six-month fieldwork, I had the chance to observe different stages of the project (voluntary membership or not, connection work and credit recovery) and the subsequent transformations in household economy sphere.

On the basis of a few selected cases (family life histories), this paper proposes an analysis of transformations within the household economy prior to the connection and once the connection is done. I will focus on how the gas installation confronts with the informal uses (practices), and how the credit payment confronts with the domestic organization of money.

**Key words:** domestic economy, popular economy, credit, service use

### **Bio-sketch**

Magdalena Isaurralde is PhD candidate in Socio-economics at the École des Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris) under the supervision of Isabelle Guérin. Her research focuses on the topic of microfinance to access public goods. She investigates both the political economy of microfinance as a phenomenon and the impact of microcredit on popular economy.

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Magdalena Isaurralde (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales)

***Gas Service and Development Projects: transforming Domestic Economies in a squatting  
in Buenos Aires***

In the West outermost area of Buenos Aires' metropolitan region, Moreno is a peri-urban municipality in constant change. On the one hand, this is due to the demographic dynamism that goes together with the growth of the metropolitan region of Buenos Aires. On the other hand, it is also due to the transformation of the scenery caused by human settlements.

Cuartel V, which is a locality in the North of Moreno, was *completely rural*<sup>1</sup> not very long ago. At least that is how its first dwellers describe it — that is, as a territory that progressively stopped being rural, and little by little became more metropolitan. Consequently, it is not surprising that by the 1970's many of its first dwellers settled in *quintas* (country houses built in large fields), whose owners employed workers from the northern argentine provinces. These territories were later *divided into lots*<sup>2</sup> for residential purposes, ceasing the former exploitation of the land.

As a result of the work carried out by the families, who built the walls, Cuartel V started an urbanization process that continued thanks to family initiatives. The popular housing is a life plan, which is almost always unfinished, that establishes the family bonds related to the project of having a house of their own. Following this line, some neighborhoods in Cuartel

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<sup>1</sup> In spanish, the *vecinos* use the expression « *era todo campo* » to describe the landscape.

<sup>2</sup> They were subdivided or *loteados*,

V, like the Milenio (a recent settlement), were built following a *private* delimitation of the *public space*. The community, either alone or with the support of local associations, settled boundaries along the plots of land or delimited the exploitation of the land approximately according to the administrative organization that was inherited from the colony—the *manzana* (block)—. It was after this that they started laying the bricks.

As well as in the case of other peripheral localities, the progressive integration of Cuartel V in the urban zone was a result of the extension of public services. Firstly, in the late 1980's electricity was installed in the neighborhoods. Afterwards, in the 1990's home phone service was also installed thanks to the negotiation between the *vecinos* and the private company which had the concession. But, as a lady from the Irigoien neighborhood explains, some services will probably never reach Cuartel V, because “they call us ‘red zone’”. What is hidden behind this expression is a way of describing the presumed defaulting of the families, among other negative characteristics that make Cuartel V an unattractive territory for public utility companies.

The installation of natural gas in Cuartel V resulted from a community complaint supported by a local NGO, the Fundación Provivienda Social, which allowed for the first community organization project to manage the provision of the service. This experience took place during the Argentine crisis of 2001 and was crowned by multiple “success stories” in the universe of NGOs and development assistance. It was from this experience that a “participatory” model of living enhancement of low-income neighborhoods and formal access to public utilities emerged. This model consists in a voluntary registration of neighbors to the service and a financial contribution to the home service line installation through micro-credits aimed at covering the cost of the technical intervention in households. Yet, in spite of their reputation, the initiatives for the gas underwent major difficulties. An improvement of the living conditions in Cuartel V, as well as a public aid to provide gas

bottles and regulate energy prices contributed to decrease the interest for the being connected to the network<sup>3</sup>.

My field study in Buenos Aires started in 2012 with an internship in Fundación Provienda Social. My goal was to grasp the meaning that the access to the natural gas service had for the families, and to understand the economic transformations that the provision of this service entailed. My observational study started by following the complex registration procedure required by the gas service and the household interventions required for the loan approval, as well as for the installation of the service line within the houses.

In a project in which the access to the gas service signifies a global improvement in the household situation in the rationality of the development actors, certain actions are conceived as mere stages of a project. Yet these actions, that include installing a new pipe or a new window, or dividing a bedroom in two, are not insignificant for the household members. Both physically and financially, this home intrusion is a synonym of change in the domestic organization of the household.

In this work I will describe three important transformations in the domestic economy through a case study of the Suarez family. The first one is related to the symbolic ruptures in the configuration of the space, which weaken the economic equilibrium and value systems. The second transformation relates to the process of indebtedness caused by the new forms of consumption. Lastly, the third transformation results from the second, and is related to the inversion of roles that takes place in the domestic sphere by reason of the changes within the domestic finance. These transformations took place due to the provision of the natural gas service, and can be understood only on the condition of considering popular housing as integral part of the popular economy. A short aside concerning this link is therefore proposed to introduce the transformations in the domestic sphere.

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<sup>3</sup> The situation of the gas projects, at the time my research was carried out, can be related to J.P. Olivier de Sardan's analysis on the constraints weighing on development projects, especially those linked with the changes in the economic policy.

### Popular housing as part of the popular economy

Like many other houses in Cuartel V, Argentina Suarez's house is not a uniform and continuous structure. The progressive construction of walls allowed the spouses to build the rooms as the family grew larger. When Argentina tells the story of how she built the house with her deceased husband, she describes a project that lasted more than twenty years. The financial effort, the learning and the building of bonds stand out in this project:

When we came here, building the hut was like planting a flag for us. I remember that Antonio and I bought first a hut made out of *Durlock* with his first Christmas bonus, because my salary from the pyrotechnics factory wasn't enough... And when we started the construction, we were very lucky because Antonio worked at *Durlock*, and he asked them for help with the roof. He said: "Hey, I'm building my house and I don't have a roof yet, could you help me with that?." "Well," they said, "write a check and we'll then discount it from your salary." So he brought the roof to our house and learned how to put it. But the wood, no, we didn't have that stuff. After José was born, we were pretty much on a budget. But as soon as we could save some money, we went to the *corralon*<sup>4</sup> to buy supplies.

Argentina, 71 years old, Mayor del Pino

dweller

The settlement of Argentina and Antonio Suarez in Cuartel V resembles many of the testimonies we could gather in the neighborhood. Cuartel V dwellers often describe their parents and children helping them, but also family members who are not so close who contribute both in the practice and teaching of construction trades. It can be noticed that in these testimonies popular housing is integrated within a popular economy, where resources—both material and human—are available locally (Coraggio, 2006). The prevailing characteristic of the popular economy is the predominance of a "reproduction of life" kind of rationality, as it is defined by Hinkelammert and Mora Jiménez (2009). This is a reproductive rationality that is not unaware of collective conventions, social norms or other characteristics of an instrumental rationality, but it submits them in a logic of human needs. According to Hillenkamp's analysis on popular economy (2013), housing within

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<sup>4</sup> The building materials store.

popular economy also works as protection from different kinds of difficulties typically caused by poverty. As in other families in Cuartel V, Argentina's children planned their adult life based on their (very close) proximity to the Suarez house. The space organization allows for the observation of these connections.

### *The configuration of the domestic space*

The oldest and central part of the Suarez house, which has four rooms (two bedrooms, a living room and the kitchen), is in the front section of the plot. It was in this part that Argentina and her husband settled in 1978 and lived with their three children (two sons and a daughter). Rooms were added to this “founding” structure based on a matrix, which was the kitchen. The expanse in the back of this place of residence is typical of the oldest plots in the neighborhood Mayor del Pino that are close to the provincial route. The (larger) dimensions of these plots are approximately the same as those allowed by the provincial norms (12 m wide and 30 m deep) and make it possible to work on the expanse lengthwise.

In the configuration of the Suarez house the kitchen is a matrix, given that this was the link that connected the two structures of the house before the natural gas service was provided. Actually, Argentina's husband and her sons built two rooms “annexed” to the kitchen—and connected to it—behind the oldest structure of the house. The family called these added rooms “the little rooms in the back” [*las piecitas del fondo*] In the family history, “the little rooms in the back” provided them a certain autonomy in the context of their dependence to the family. When José turned eighteen, he began to build some intimacy. The second little room responded to the same logic, given that its construction started two years later, when Javier, the second son, also turned eighteen.

In this limited space Argentina's three children rotated for the last ten years with their respective couples. The two eldest did that before settling in other places in Moreno, close to

their parents. Afterwards, the younger daughter used both “little rooms” and permanently settled there with her husband and two children.

Not long before the natural gas service was provided, the kitchen was the place that joined both generations. In the Suarez house, mother and daughter took turns to prepare meals. And it was either the daughter or her husband who were in charge of replacing the gas cylinders in order to cook. Cooking was, in fact, one of the few moments that gathered mother and daughter. In some way, it allowed a rotation for children’s care, a short moment of rest and sharing. The provision of the natural gas service caused changes in the kitchen, which were a milestone that founded the imbalance in family bonds.

#### *Dividing space and redefining family bonds*

In the projects related to natural gas led by the Fundación, the installation of the service requires a thorough inspection of the interior of the house, which is carried out during the household visit. For Cuartel V dwellers, registering for the natural gas project means accepting the installation terms as well as the conditions for credit granting. Two employees of the Fundación go to the visit. Their functions are related to the already mentioned aspects: while one of them pictures the planning of the pipeline, the other (who always is a female, a *vecina*) estimates the family resources and thinks of possible collateral in case of delayed payment.

Although most of the homes in Cuartel V do not comply with the regulations for the residential use of gas, everything is “negotiated” in the household visits. However, this is not always done in favor of the configuration of the house’s space that was established by the families, and Argentina’s case is not an exception.

Effectively, at the Suarez, both agents from the NGO considered it was *unacceptable* to have an open kitchen almost adjacent to the bedrooms and with no air circulation. While the

technical issues prevailed in their arguments, the duty of appointing a legally responsible person had almost the same importance. In Argentina's house the organization of the natural gas service provision was "rushed"<sup>5</sup>—as she describes it—, in the sense that declining the technical and financial offer of the NGO would have meant giving up the "unique" opportunity of installing the gas service and its benefits.

Resembling what happens in the projects that encourage consumption within poverty<sup>6</sup>, in the case of the Fundación, the household visit is a moment that "is not repeated," and the diagnosis of the two agents is presented as an offer limited in time that must be "taken advantage of," according to the NGO's discourse. In this case, the swiftness of the interaction and the ease of the contact with beneficiaries turn into essential factors in the offering of the service. We can compare this situation with Guérin's observations (2007) in India<sup>7</sup>. She shows how the NGOs, especially those that manage credit, act locally under the pressure and yielding obligations of those who finance it. Frequently, the acting agents seek ease and speed<sup>8</sup> without delving into the complexity of the beneficiaries' situation.

As Argentina tells us, she "didn't care so much about the gas," as she had "lived with gas cylinders for seventy years." But her daughter did care about installing it. Having a gas cooker with four burners, forget about the monthly (sometimes weekly) gas cylinder supply did make a difference in her organization, especially as her infant son and young child's care needed great attention. These arguments made that she could easily forget the price, 10 000 pesos, (that is 5 times her income), for the benefit of a connection at home which allowed her to save time on tedious work. Yet, actually, the problem was that the Suarez family did not have enough money [*no daban los números*] to install the natural gas service

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<sup>5</sup> *Apurada* in spanish

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Bottom of the pyramid projects based on Prahalad assumptions on substantial purchasing power within poverty.

<sup>7</sup> Guérin Isabelle, Kumar Santosh, « Clientélisme, courtage et gestion des risques en microfinance. », *Autrepart* 4/2007 (n° 44) , p. 13-26

<sup>8</sup> Cf. David Mosse (2000) on the idea of perpetuation of inequities



everywhere. But taking into account the logic of the “unique offer”, Argentina was willing to assume the responsibility of the credit. In fact, having some receipts, being able to access formal income through her husband’s and/or her own pension made the rapid registering process easier. That is why she assumed she “didn’t have a choice” but to register as a user and to accept the offer of installing the natural gas service for the kitchen in the front section of the house.

As it happened in other plots with multiple houses, in the case of the Suarez family the technical intervention meant the closing of circulation spaces to legalize" the construction, in the framework of the service. As the kitchen was now in the front section, the place of family interaction moved to the living room, therefore isolating the “little rooms,” which were now only used for resting. This caused conflicts in the use and purchase of objects that required the use of gas.

#### *Reproduction of commercial debts, value systems and power disequilibria*

The household visit allows for the purchase of a wide variety of devices: the stove, hot water tank, gas heater... The “uniqueness” of the visit, in addition to what was previously explained, is also linked with the possibility of subscribing a loan for the purchase of devices, which are presented as an “unbeatable offer.” In this sense, the visit makes it possible to incur commercial debts related to new forms of consumption that were not previously among the family needs. The purchase of a hot water heater, a gas cooker with four burners replacing the single burner system or even a small gas heating systems were the three main elements comprised in the NGO’s offer.

In the household visits we perceived that many inhabitants of Cuartel V “add up their expenses” with a “a way of conceiving calculations with both monetary as well as social and cultural criteria” (Villarreal, 2008). In this way, during the visit the provision of the natural

gas service is weighted in terms of monetary calculation as well as non-monetary calculation, “which entail diverse ways of rating, measuring and mobilizing goods and resources as well as social relationships” (Villarreal, 2008).

In Argentina’s case, the ownership of the natural gas service contract and the division of the space led to internal compensations related to the relationship with her daughter and the isolation of spaces that were previously connected:

With the stove from Fundación I bought a fireplace that has little flames but works with gas. My daughter chose it because her children liked it. And I gave in. After that, in the little rooms in the back we put one of those “hot and cold” air conditioner devices, because the natural gas didn’t reach that part of the house, and I wasn’t going to leave them with no heating. And well, my kid charges my credit card because she doesn’t have one and I buy her what she tells me in installments.

Argentina, 71 years old, Mayor del Pino dweller

In Argentina’s testimony it can be found a disequilibrium that is not taken as such: the preservation of the relationship with her daughter entails the contraction of debts that she is willing to pay, and that she does not perceive as a weakening of her finance because what prevails in her “calculation” is the relationship with her daughter and not the monetary cost of the debt that was contracted. For her daughter, however, the benefit of the service and the devices that make its consumption possible do not have a monetary cost. In the relationship between her and her mother, the gas service and its consumption establish an asymmetrical relationship where she dominates.

Argentina’s situation is similar to other cases that we observed in the framework of this project. For her generation, who had formal income, the access to new forms of consumption makes them prone to contract debts from which they were previously immune, as they could manage without natural gas. In the same way, the natural gas service allows for new sources of indebtedness: the regular use of the service, the purchase of devices related to its use, the debt that comes from the installation. In the complexity of this process

it can also be noticed—as Villarreal does (2004; 2008)—that the limits of the debts that can be contracted are not clearly defined, and neither are those of the debts that exceed the limits of what it can be repaid.

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