



Morea, Melinos and Morea, Juan xxiii Complex, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1967-1973. © Soledad Armada, 2006.

Paradigms of Collective Housing in Buenos Aires Lessons from Juan XXIII

BY SOLEDAD ARMADA

The housing deficit in Buenos Aires exceeds 143,000 dwellings. Fortunately, the city has ninety years of social housing experience to draw research from. Does this problem require new ideas or can it be studied from the existing examples?

The essay proposes a quick overview of ten housing projects that were built in the 20th century and that represent different models of collective housing. One of them, Juan XXIII Complex – absent in the historical revisions – stands out for its design, size and integrated vision of the community. Architects and students committed to the city and its housing deficit should study this unpublished project.

In 2000, a full section of the *Ciudadela* Housing Complex, also known as *Fuerte Apache*, was demolished in Buenos Aires. It had been built in the 1970s in a context influenced by Team X and the New Towns. Its intention had been very different from what it proved to be: a focus of poverty and crime, inaccessible even to the police. This is the exponent of several massive housing building failures in Buenos Aires and its metropolitan area.

By 1972, the Pruitt Igoe Housing Complex in Saint Louis, had been demolished for similar reasons. For Charles Jenks, it remains as a symbol of failure of the Modern Movement ideals. According to the critic Anahí Ballent, it also represents the abandonment of the intention to solve housing problems.

All the great cities have their own “*Fuerte Apache*”, like *Spinaceto* in Rome, *La Mina* in Barcelona, or *Scampia* in Naples. These places are usually known through media reports for ominous news and frightening pictures. What is surprising is the attribution of the origin of social conflict to architecture. It seems that in this model the inhabitants operate as neutral beings without economic, social or cultural conditions.

Anahí Ballent asseverates that in Argentina architects seemed horrified at the common reviling of superblock buildings and large housing projects though denying the complexity of the problems involved. And there the debate has stopped. In addition to the absence of public policies, the housing issue went out of fashion. It seems that these big failures did not allow appreciation of what had been done well.

Taking into account that the housing deficit in Buenos Aires currently exceeds 143,000 dwellings houses¹ and goes *in crescendo*; and that much research on social housing has been undertaken, although unsystematically, does this problem require new ideas or can it be studied from the

existing examples? Fortunately, Buenos Aires has ninety years of social housing experience and there is research² and several articles³ that demonstrate so. Is there any project that could fulfill the needs of one time in history and still hold today valid principles of modernism?

A Quick Overview of 10 Housing Complexes in Buenos Aires

In order to learn from the public housing experience in the city of Buenos Aires, I will guide you through a tour of 10 projects that were built in the 20th century and that represent different models of collective housing where a specific policy and city type was employed. Each project has been selected either because it represents a period in time or because it represents a contribution to the architectural discipline.

The first development called *Barrio Butteler* was carried out by the government in 1907. It was a time where immigration flow exceeded the accommodation capacity of the city (overcrowded tenements, lack of sanitary conditions and epidemics). The authorities began to think of housing as a social device that could integrate and settle a large population from different places. This project represents the first expansive development across the first city limits, refusing the attempts to reform the city center. Its main characteristic is the modification of the traditional Spanish block making it cleaner and more hygienic. Four narrow streets divide the traditional colonial block into four trapezoidal smaller blocks and a central public square. Sixty-four detached houses were created following the “*casa chorizo*” type.

In 1924, for the first time, the municipality announced a competition for three social housing complexes. By then, architects and politicians had discussed the benefits of individual *versus* collective housing and its legal counterpart, home ownership or rental.

The discussion encouraged the study of innovative urban types such as the “*spaguetti block*”. In order to build as many individual houses as possible, a long and narrow block — 40m by 140m — was created. It represented one third of the typical Buenos Aires block. It was divided into plots of 9m × 18m. The unit was a semi-detached duplex that repeated symmetrically, generating an ensemble that shared the voids. Between 1923 and 1927 seven neighborhoods were built reducing the housing deficit by a total of 5,000 houses and expanding the urban fabric to unpopulated areas in the west. *Barrio Esteban Bonorino* (1926), with 900 units is an example to visit.

From the competition called in 1924, *Casa Colectiva Los Andes* was built in 1928. Its author, architect Fermin Bereterbide, projected an innovative block holding 154 apartments, distributed in four-level clusters that surround three interior squares. Inspired by a Viennese housing court, this collective housing complex has shops facing the streets while a kindergarten, a small theater and other amenities are located in its interior surrounded by courtyards and trees. Fortunately, this rich interior can be seen from the outside thanks to generous open doors. The green terraces on the first-floor level can also be appreciated from the street.

By 1930 the debate between individual *versus* collective house was over. The economic crisis and the increasing housing deficit found in the large-scale housing building an efficient and rapid answer.

Casa Colectiva América (1928), with 95 apartments, symbolizes the end of the process of the gradual disappearance of the traditional interior *patio*. Its landscaped central space containing the access extends the urban space into the building.

During the two Peronist governments (1945–1955), *home* as a social right was vindicated. It responded to a new housing demand arising from the internal migration from rural areas to the cities.

By 1948, the Horizontal Property Act allowed subdivision of property. It intended to facilitate ownership of private property by all Argentinians. It eliminated the relationship between condominium and rental, and modified the production of urban housing.

Barrio Los Perales (1949) is one of the first Peronist housing schemes. It represents the new urban architectural model used for collective housing: the “monoblock” and the “superblock”. More than 1,000 apartments are distributed in neighborhoods alongside in a 20ha park.

At the same time, the Cooperative *El Hogar Obrero* worked prolificly in the housing field. Between 1941 and 1951, architects Bereterbide, Acosta and Felice proposed a new urban type for the plot that the Cooperative owned in Caballito. A twenty five-level tower was built on the north side of the block, surrounded by two minor towers of fourteen levels each. They were built according to the new Urban Planning Code permitting a greater height and prefigured the future height of neighboring buildings. The project also offered a commercial and public ground floor plan, and offices at level one.

By 1953 *Barrio Simón Bolívar* was inaugurated. As Le Corbusier’s *redents*, the architect Farina Rice designed a

big complex inside a park, containing 676 apartments. It represents a city type that was being debated during that time: the concentrated city developed in height through high-density buildings in distinction to satellite towns and decentralization of the metropolitan area.

Five years later, in 1958, another complex was built in a park in Belgrano. *Conjunto Lisandro de la Torre* includes 96 units according to the Buenos Aires Plan. The design team, following Le Corbusier’s urban ideas, was led by Antoni Bonet and Juan Kurchan.

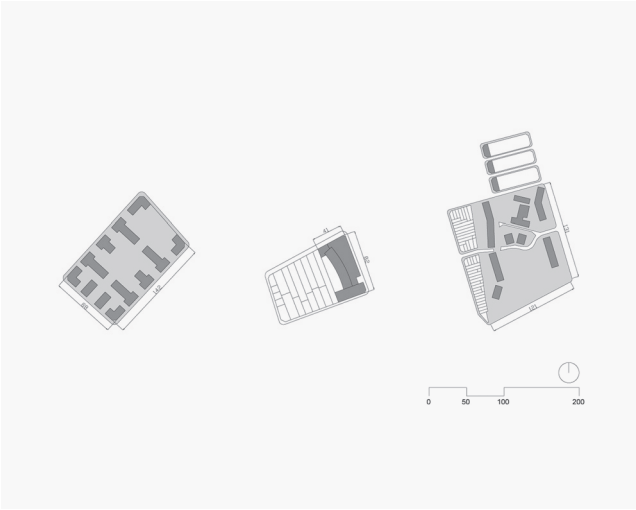
By the middle of 1960’s, the Inter-American Development Bank began to finance high-density complexes in Latin America. *Bajo Flores* was a convenient area promoted by *Plan Director para Buenos Aires* (1958–1965). One example is *Conjunto Urbano Lugano I – II* (1965–1973). Influenced by Team X, the designers tried to create a new urban landscape with 9,700 apartments. This is an example of the lower social class being isolated from the city and being disadvantaged.

At the same time, another type of housing project was being conceived near there, in *Nueva Pomeya*: *Conjunto Juan XXIII* (1967–1973). It was commissioned by a cooperative — *Cooperativa Familiar de la Vivienda* — and designed by architects Morea, Molinos and the engineer Morea. It stands out due to its small size — 780 apartments —, the peculiarity of the block section and to the mixed urban design.

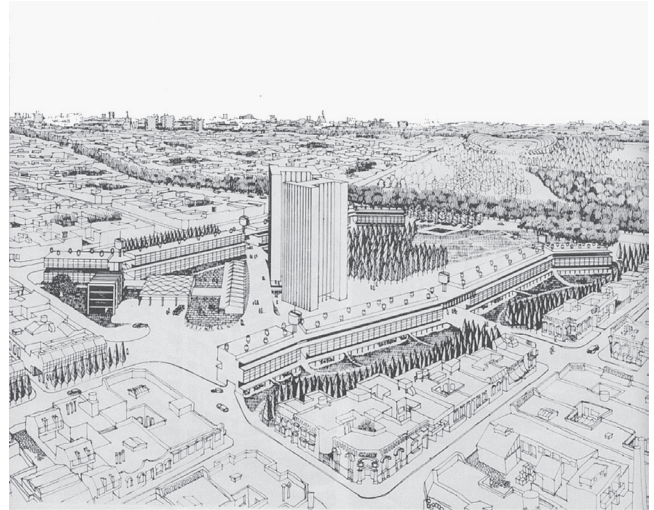
Concluding our brief tour through ten housing buildings in Buenos Aires, we can say that, even today the city benefits from these projects. *Buteller* and *Bonorino* give a spectacular and unexpected interruption to the repetitive Buenos Aires grid composed of endless streets. *Casa Colectiva Los Andes* and *Casa América* offer a qualified urban space, while *Barrio Simón Bolívar*, *Lisandro de la Torre* and *Juan XXIII* offer a great landscape. Lastly, we can affirm that due to a good design, in addition to the quality of construction, these five projects stand the test of time. These apartments are comparable to those in the private real estate market and people may forget their social housing origin. One example is *Los Andes*: if you want to move there you need to sign up to a waiting list.

The Story of the Selection

I came to know of nine of the ten projects listed above through the writings mentioned before: articles by Anahí Ballent⁴ and PMH research⁵, in addition to reviews by Francisco Liernur⁶ and Roberto Fernández⁷, and other articles in architectural magazines⁸. However, *Conjunto Juan XXIII* is notably and particularly absent in these historical revisions. I became aware of this project through the magazine *Summa* #19 (October 1969), entitled “*Arquitectura Argentina 1960/1970*”⁹. It was a special edition for the X World Congress of Architecture that had been held in Buenos Aires (*Architecture as a Social Factor* was the title of that Congress). In this magazine, the editor Francisco Bullrich reviewed the decade, dedicating several pages to housing issues. He condemned the lack of long-term public policies and appealed for participation and self-management. Additionally, he called for projects with integrated solutions and



01 Three Paradigms of Collective Housing in Buenos Aires. Left: Bereterbide, *Casa Colectiva Los Andes*, Buenos Aires, 1928. Centre: Acosta, Bereterbide, Felice, *Casa Colectiva Hogar Obrero*, Buenos Aires, 1941. Right: Morea, Morea, Molinos, *Conjunto Juan XXIII*, Buenos Aires, 1967. © Soledad Armada, 2014.



02 Bird's eye view. The perspective was drawn by Architect Molinos.



03 Second floor plan of the building block. © Soledad Armada, 2006.



04 The east façade. © Soledad Armada, 2006.



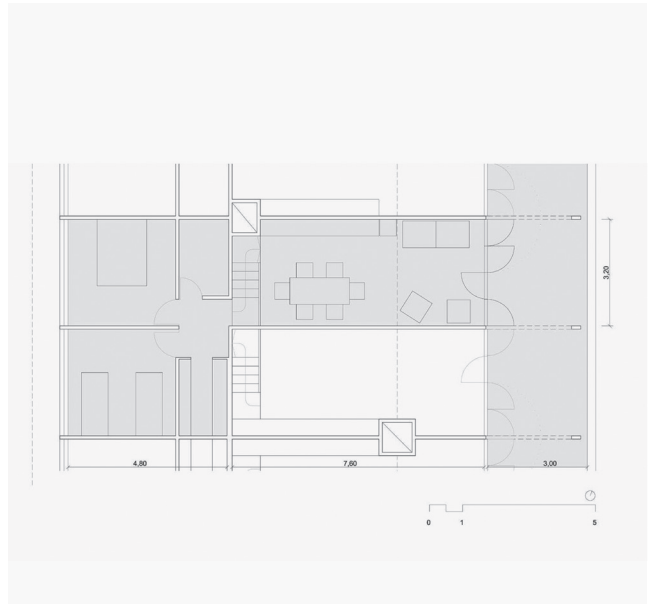
05 The west terrace looking towards the north. © Soledad Armada, 2006.



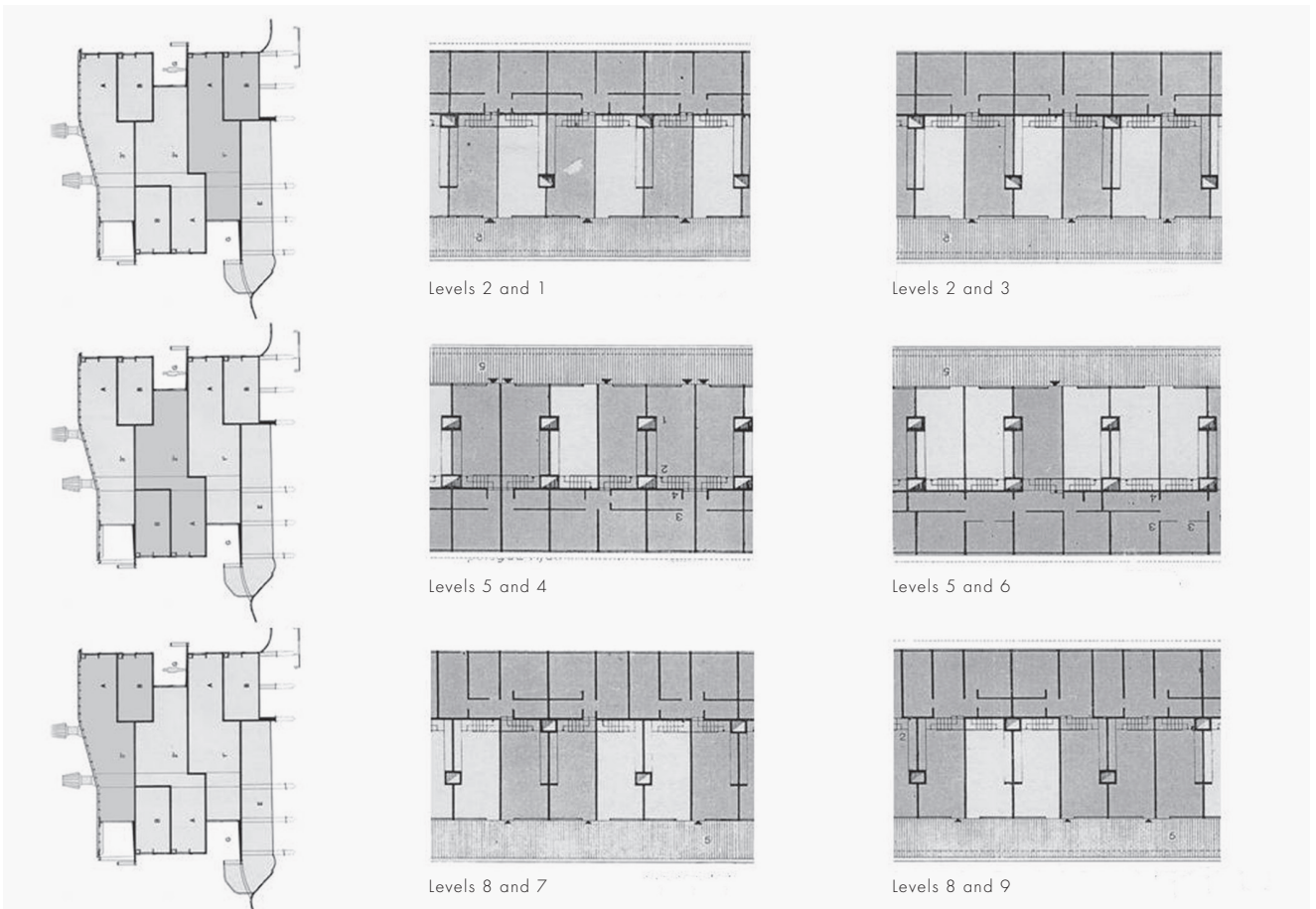
06 The east façade. © Soledad Armada, 2006.



07 Detail of the terrace. © Soledad Armada, 2006.



08 Unit floor plan. © Soledad Armada, 2006.



09 Types: plans and sections. © Soledad Armada, 2014.

incorporated into the city. He remarked, concerning Barrio Juan XXIII (under construction by that time):

(...) neither city nor a part of it can be integrated only by its architecture. The rich and complex urban reality that brings together various functions is what gives vitality to the experience of living in the city. The dormitory suburb, therefore, lacks the complexity that defines the urban experience. By virtue of this, the authors have included in the ensemble not only houses, but also offices, shops, a school, a nursery and a sports area. As for how it has been inserted into the neighborhood, the project promises an appropriate degree of permeability. If carried out, it would be the first example which would have attacked the problem with open-mindedness (...).¹⁰

The beauty of this perspective and the editorial written by Bullrich encouraged me to continue searching for the project and its authors. Then I realized that it had been published for the first time by the same magazine two years before, selected as an example of housing in Argentina¹¹. A very good documentation with the authors' recollections, the situation, the plans and the sections made me realize that it was a singular project. At the same time I discovered that one of the residential blocks had been built as originally designed.¹²

Juan XXIII Block Building

In order to achieve the cooperative's plan, a 9-story structure was designed in 4 blocks containing 36 flats in each one. Emulating the Narkomfin building in Moscow, three corridors, at levels 2, 5 and 8 run in parallel to the duplex apartments. But these buildings have different characteristics. First, they alternate on the east and west façades. Second, they are a generous 3.00m in width. Third, they are open due to the good weather conditions in Buenos Aires. Fourth, the apartments' living rooms are connected to them through the glass façade made of four French doors.

I visited the building on 25 December during Christmas. Children played in the corridor with their new toys, their parents were talking while others simply preferred to appreciate the landscape and the fresh breeze of the afternoon. Recalling this memory of the community, how they seized and took advantage of this generous open space, I should rather call them elevated streets. And because of their width, they are also the unit's terrace.

The unit also looks like Narkomfin's Cellule F. It is divided into two levels: the public level, integrating the access, the living room and the kitchen and the bedroom level. Seven steps connect the two levels. The peculiarity of the design is that bedrooms in one apartment are seven steps down while bedrooms in the neighboring apartment are seven steps up. There are different apartment types with 1, 2, and 3 bedrooms. The bedroom level is above or under the terraces depending on the unit.

The section allows natural cross ventilation. Furthermore, another sustainable aspect is that the sun is controlled on both façades. The west terraces have adjustable awnings while the bedroom windows are protected with exterior roller wooden shutters.

Conclusions

As revealed before in our quick overview of 10 housing complexes, there is plenty of social housing heritage in Buenos Aires from which to learn. Even though, Lugano I and II have not been successful projects, we can still learn from them as examples not to be repeated. If I should choose a project to follow, it would be Juan XXIII. Architects and students should study it. And especially those people who are involved with the city and its housing deficit should visit the residential block and talk to its residents. In my experience I was able to observe that they were very satisfied not only with their house but also with the neighborhood. The result is an acceptable level of maintenance of the building.

Although the urban scheme was not developed as originally designed, the study can be completed with the plans and authors' recollections. This is why, since I have become aware of its existence, my goal is to disseminate knowledge of it by showing it to my students. I hope it becomes a better known project in the near future. ■

Notes

- 1 Hilda Herzer, María Mercedes Di Virgilio, "Las Necesidades Habitacionales en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires: Quiénes, Cuántos, Cómo y Por Qué?", *Realidad Económica*, Buenos Aires, 2011, p. 131–158.
- 2 A good contribution to the history of social housing in Buenos Aires is the research *90 Años de Vivienda Social en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires* made by the University of Buenos Aires in 2000; Programa de Mantenimiento Habitacional (ed.), *90 Años de Vivienda Social en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires*, Buenos Aires, Gaglione, 2000.
- 3 The critic Anahí Ballent has also contributed with several works such as Anahí Ballent, "La Vivienda Masiva. Salvación y Caída de la Arquitectura del Siglo XX", *Revista SCA*, No. 198, Buenos Aires, 2000, p. 48–53.
- 4 Anahí Ballent, "Conjuntos Habitacionales", in Jorge F. Liernur, Fernando Aliata (comp.), *Diccionario de Arquitectura en la Argentina: Estilos, Obras, Biografías, Instituciones, Ciudades*, Vol. 2, Buenos Aires, Diario de Arquitectura Clarín, 2004; Anahí Ballent, *Las Huellas de la Política. Vivienda, Ciudad, Peronismo en Buenos Aires, 1943–1955*, Bernal, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2005; Anahí Ballent, "La Vivienda Masiva. Salvación y Caída de la Arquitectura del siglo XX", *Revista SCA*, No. 198, Buenos Aires, 2000, p. 48–53.
- 5 Programa de Mantenimiento Habitacional, op. cit..
- 6 Jorge Francisco Liernur, *Arquitectura en la Argentina del Siglo XX*, Buenos Aires, Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 2001.
- 7 Roberto Fernández, *La Ilusión Projectual. Una Historia de la Arquitectura Argentina 1955–1995*, Mar del Plata, Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, 1996.
- 8 Gustavo Diéguez, "Vivienda Económica de Interés Social: del Experimento Estatal Hasta el Ensayo Civil", *Revista Summa*, No. 71, Buenos Aires, Summa, 2004.
- 9 Francisco Bullrich, "Arquitectura Argentina 1960/70", *Revista Summa*, No. 19 — Edición especial para el X Congreso Mundial de Arquitectura, Buenos Aires, Summa, 1969.
- 10 *Idem*.
- 11 Leonardo Aizenberg, "La Vivienda en el República Argentina: 11 Ejemplos", *Revista Summa*, No. 10, Buenos Aires, 1967, p. 33.
- 12 Architect Horacio Baliero, as professor at Universidad de Buenos Aires, used to recommend to his students the visit to the building.

Soledad Armada

(Buenos Aires, 1979). Architect (2004), Universidad de Buenos Aires. Master's degree in Housing: *Master Laboratorio de la Vivienda del siglo XXI* (2007), *Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya*. Professor at Palermo University (since 2008): *Vivienda Mínima Contemporánea; Urbanismo 1; Posgrado Vivienda Hábitat y Ciudad*. Soledad Armada is undertaking the research project *Acciones dentro de la ciudad. Del problema habitacional al programa residencial* (2011) and is founder and co-director of Armada Otero architecture office (since 2008).