CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In February 2016, one of Spain's leading newspapers, *El País*, published a story about Villa 31, one of the biggest slums in the center of the city of Buenos Aires, with this headline: "The misery that is impossible to hide in the center of Buenos Aires" (*La Nación* 2017). Paradoxically, in October of the same year, that headline became an opportunity for the mayor of Buenos Aires, Rodríguez Larreta, to announce a monumental redevelopment plan that would profoundly change the city's social fabric and urban form: the urbanization of Villa 31 and its social integration with the rest of the city.[1] At the Habitat III Regional Conference held in Ecuador in 2016, Rodriguez Larreta explained: "I want an integrated city, in which everyone can have the same rights and responsibilities... a city without slums, integrated from north to south" (*La Nación* 2016, my translation). This urban plan—incomplete at the time of writing—has become the central pillar of Buenos Aires's urban redevelopment agenda.

In September 2012, during his second year as mayor of Chicago, and as part of a commitment to revitalize "underutilized" lands and former industrial areas on the city's southwest side, Rahm Emanuel publicly announced that he aimed to: "'Return these areas to active, productive

[1] Briefly, urbanization means formalizing housing tenure and incorporating informal settlements into the domains of existing public services. Improving social integration means reducing inequalities and divisions and promoting quality interaction and a sense of belonging in diverse social environments (Lindquist 2021).

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2023

C. Sternberg, *Neoliberal Urban Governance*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-21718-0_1

use for the residents of the Pilsen and Little Village neighborhoods. This (…) is an important step toward creating jobs and a healthy environment for these communities'" (in Scalzitti 2012). Emanuel's announcement marked the beginning of a series of redevelopment projects aimed at physically and socially transforming the historically disinvested communities of Pilsen and Little Village.

These mayoral announcements inaugurated a new phase of urban development for each city, but most importantly, they revealed a new era of redevelopment in historically and deeply stigmatized areas. Despite decades of disinvestment in Buenos Aires's center and south side and in Chicago's southwest side, to governance actors, acres of property parcels and land (especially in the slums of Buenos Aires) now seem ripe for a new phase of urban restructuring. Long-time area residents neglected for decades by public and private funds in both city areas now face a wave of transformation—social as well as physical. Chicago's Pilsen and Little Village and Buenos Aires's La Boca, San Telmo, and Villa 31 are areas in critical need of being drawn into the social fabric and the real estate market of each city. In particular, since the 1970s Pilsen and Little Village have struggled with poverty as a result of structural racism and overall social, physical, and economic disinvestment. In Buenos Aires, La Boca and San Telmo have suffered physical and economic neglect since the 1980s. Villa 31 has historically been cast as an "eyesore of the city" because of its considerable neglect, poverty, and marginalization.

In this book, I consider how the physical and social transformation of these areas is unfolding. I examine how neoliberal urban governances in Chicago and Buenos Aires—institutions, programs, and procedures—work to advance particular redevelopment agendas in a drive to transform previously disinvested and stigmatized neighborhoods.

Chicago and Buenos Aires have been experiencing increasing urban gentrification that is carried out as official government policy. In both cities, neoliberal governance actors—driven by market-oriented goals rather than distributive ones—are exercising new power to upscale targeted blocks in the most neglected and stigmatized areas. In other words, neoliberal governance in each urban setting has moved into an uncharted terrain of impoverished and deeply stigmatized communities. Yet, how neoliberal governances in both cities currently operate as they

move into these new areas remains unexplored by comparative critical urban studies literature.[2]

Notably, this new phase of redevelopment is not merely a decisive and determined urban project but the result of something humanly and adroitly crafted among an assemblage of actors: city officials, local boards, developers, architects, and real estate agents. I propose that Chicago's and Buenos Aires's neoliberal urban governances are doing more than simply producing and rationalizing new policies and procedures. These formations must work through visions of the city, its institutions, its people, and communities, whose impoverishment, stigma, and institutional neglect—the governances suggest—are obstacles to a successful urban transformation. In this context, I ask: How do neoliberal urban governances in Chicago and Buenos Aires unfold their urban plans for transformation while responding to changing political realities, contestation, growing inequalities, and obstacles to development and redevelopment? How do these formations adjust to the ongoing contestation they face in advancing redevelopment? What kind of spaces (material and imagined) and cultural understandings do these actors seek to build across Chicago and Buenos Aires? Finally, I consider how, with the encroaching commodification of urban spaces and landscapes, people living in these formerly neglected areas face new challenges, including the threat of displacement.

Central to my endeavor is a consideration of how neoliberal urban governance in both cities deploys rhetoric to build acceptance, dissuade resistance, and normalize the commodification of the targeted areas. That rhetoric includes metaphors, common understandings, imagined spaces, and sanitary codes. For an example of how neoliberal governance rhetoric works, consider Chicago's southwest side. For decades ignored or overlooked for formal redevelopment, this area is now imagined and discussed by city officials, real estate, and business leaders as what I term "prosperous and orderly ethnic spaces" (Pilsen) and "culturally rich multiethnic spaces" (Little Village) as contributors to Chicago's neoliberal globalization efforts. Similarly, the center (Villa 31) and south sides (La Boca

[2] There are few examples of comparative urban studies that explore Latin American neoliberal urban governances, see, for example, Saad-Filho (2020), Springer et al. (2016), and Kunkel and Mayer (2012). However, these studies do not address how neoliberal governances work to advance redevelopment agendas in a drive to transform previously stigmatized neighborhoods.

and San Telmo) of Buenos Aires, also for decades, have been largely neglected and overlooked for urban transformation. Yet, these areas in Buenos Aires have been rediscovered as "cultural, touristic and versatile artistic spaces" (La Boca and San Telmo); "livable, formalized, and robust spaces" (Villa 31); and as contributors to Buenos Aires's socio-inclusive efforts. In addition, Villa 31 in Buenos Aires is now presented as an opportunity for renovated "multi-cultural and gastronomic experiences" in efforts to create more revenues for the city and new sources of profits. Identifying these spaces and governances' dominant goals, urban agendas, and actions is important; they provide the frame to understand the current southwest side and center-south side involvement. While physically transforming these disinvested areas, neoliberal urban governances have also been cultivating positive identities in both cities. In the case of Chicago, the governance has shaped Latinos/as/x experiences by positively rendering them as, what I term, "ethnicity-infused beings." In Buenos Aires, the term "*vecinos*" rather than "*villeros/as*" has been used to cultivate positive identities and encourage acceptance of the residents of Villa 31.

The physical and social transformation of these areas in Chicago and Buenos Aires is still highly uneven and continues to unfold in various stages. To governance actors, these areas are in critical need of being integrated in the social composition and real estate market of each city. Rhetoric is fundamental to advancing these challenging urban projects. How are these governances framing redevelopment in Buenos Aires and Chicago around the sharp edges of the market? What are their strategies—do they emphasize consensual and depoliticized language, mobilize a large bureaucratic machine, or change their rhetoric to suit particular contexts? I find that the rhetoric deployed—"as powerful as any physical and social remaking" (Wilson 2018, p. 2)—makes possible both a physical transformation and commodification of both Chicago's southwest and Buenos Aires's center-south sides.

Central to this process, neoliberal governance rhetoric in Chicago and Buenos Aires, along with policies and redevelopment projects, reflects specific race and class identities and anxieties. Following Wilson (2007, 2018), Derickson (2017), Bonilla-Silva (2013), and Mele (2013), I consider how race and class shape the production of governance core processes and rhetoric. Racialization and class making, and their integration into economic processes, are often nuanced and subtle: we can see them in situated meanings, expressions, and common understandings

about people and spaces (Wilson 2007). For example, "livable spaces," "orderly and clean neighborhoods," "cultural and productive citizens," and "up-and-coming neighborhoods"—all these communicate both racial and class constructs and imply that these spaces are made for particular groups of people (Wilson 2018, p. 42). In other words, identifying a governance's redevelopment projects, policies, and rhetoric must be sensitive to the production and use of race and class. Neoliberal governances' rhetoric and actions along these new redevelopment frontiers have both old and new racial and class roots; following Derickson (2017), we can trace how they are embedded in ways that are often not immediately apparent.

My goal is to question neoliberal urban governances as forceful assemblage of institutions when they advance their redevelopment projects. When the mayors of Chicago and Buenos Aires announced their plans in 2012 and 2016, they not only presented core urban agendas for each governance, they communicated a sense of decisive and determined governances pushing their agendas forward. Such announcements often marginalize instability, contradictions, struggle, and resistance to redevelopment. In this book, I present a different kind of story, with a complex vision of neoliberal urban governance. I contend that it is crucial to nuance the official stories, recognizing that governances continuously adjust to shifting social, political, and economic circumstances as they plan and advance their projects across cities and neighborhoods. I show that to advance redevelopment, while leaving unresolved some very real dilemmas faced by residents and policymakers, governances mobilize persuasive and powerful discourse deployed by city officials, local boards, developers, architects, and real estate agents.

I argue also that governances that share a common neoliberal framework operate distinctively in particular locations: they are significantly different entities as locally grounded formations. Neoliberal urban governances are constituted in the richness of particular localities, where they are mediated by distinctive socio-political institutions, institutionalized practices, cultures, and economic realities. As I discuss in the comparative analysis presented in Chapter 8, each local neoliberal governance advances processes of redevelopment and growth in a locally specific way. Each formation—locally constituted and humanly crafted—uses distinctive rhetoric (metaphors, common understandings, imagined spaces, sanitary codes), programs, and policies.

Currently, comparative research on the locally grounded nature of neoliberal urban governance has predominantly addressed North American cities in comparison with cities in Europe, South Africa, and Asia (Springer et al. 2016; Kunkel and Mayer 2012; Leitner et al. 2007). Few comparative studies exist that feature Latin American cities (Saad-Filho 2020; Kunkel and Mayer 2012; Kanai and Ortega-Alcaráz 2009). Chicago and Buenos Aires are both large and globally connected world cities[3] that have not been previously examined comparatively, nor have the dynamics of their governances.

At the structural level, Chicago's and Buenos Aires's urban governances may be seen as engaged in similar efforts: to entrepreneurialize government actions, create more responsible and business-oriented citizens, build a strong local business climate, and fashion a globally competitive, consumption-oriented city (Hackworth 2007; Bennett 2006). But if we focus on the nature of evolving places, "we see a patchwork of wildly varying neoliberal governances that often barely resemble each other" (Wilson 2004, p. 772).

In this context, this book contributes to a growing comparative perspective on this type of governance, analyzing two world cities with different urban, historical, and political trajectories, drawing on scholarly traditions from the Global South and Global North (Robinson 2016).

Perspective and Definitions

Cultural Economy

I use a cultural economy framework that closely follows David Wilson's approach (2007) to understanding these sorts of governances. Wilson emphasizes that economic processes do not operate in a cultural vacuum

[3] There appears to be a consensus that cities and the dynamics of urbanization have been changed by the intensification of global processes. Sassen (2002 [1991]) describes "global cities" as the command and control centers for economic, political, and cultural globalization. Urban studies scholars, including Benton-Short et al. (2005), have largely defined global or world cities as major sites for the accumulation of capital, command points in the world economy, headquarters for corporations, and important hubs of global transportation and communication. While there are many limitations and biases to this definition (e.g., cities concentrated in the Global North are seen as the most networked or most highly ranked compared to the Global South), for the purpose of this study, I will follow Benton-Short and colleagues' (2005) definition to characterize both Buenos Aires and Chicago as global cities.