RESHAPING THE URBAN CORE:
The Politics of Housing in Authoritarian Uruguay*

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THE CENTRAL CITY IN LATIN AMERICA

The problem of squatter settlements in Latin American cities has received far greater attention than any other theme in Latin American urban studies in the last fifteen years. The issues and debates at the heart of the field—the definition of the culture of poverty, the question of the marginality of the poor, and the concept of the urban informal sector—all have evolved out of and centered on discussing the plight of urban squatters. The sheer magnitude of the phenomenon of squatting in urban Latin America no doubt justifies this degree of attention. In addition, pursuit of the topic has provided a rich source of data for theorists interested in reinterpreting Latin American urban development from a Marxist perspective. The emphasis on squatting has also had some negative consequences, however. One result is that other important themes and other areas outside the urban periphery have received only superficial treatment; another is that the general applicability of the insights derived from the analysis of squatting has remained in doubt.

One area that has undergone considerable change in recent decades and has received scant attention from scholars is the central city. Earlier in the century, central-city areas housed both the urban upper class and a significant portion of the urban poor. In São Paulo, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Lima, Santiago de Chile, and Buenos Aires, central-city tenements of similar design were the focus of working-class (and immigrant) culture. Although some accounts exist of the social and material conditions in central districts in the early part of the century, little research has been done on the subsequent development of

these neighborhoods.[1] Curiously, one of the few examples is the work of Oscar Lewis on the *vecindades* of Mexico City, writings that have inspired some of the most heated debates in the field and have led to the more sophisticated case studies of urban squatters.[2]

Scholars may have justified their relative inattention to central cities by the observation (which is corroborated by the few existing studies) that these areas have experienced gradual, but marked, decline over the last several decades.[3] More compelling reasons exist for examining closely the changing social conditions of central districts, however. Although the central cities are no longer the focus of working-class and immigrant life, they retain some important, if specific, functions for the urban poor population. Precisely because of their decline, central cities still manage to attract a portion of recent urban migrants and impoverished families. Central districts also provide a significant source of employment to certain groups of workers, particularly those engaged in casual labor in such occupations as domestic service, street vending, and construction.[4] Yet apart from the possibility of living in squatter settlements close to the city center—a realistic alternative only in a small number of cities—relatively little is known about available strategies for moving into and remaining near the center, despite the evident value of such residential patterns for the urban poor.

A second reason for devoting careful attention to conditions and changes in the central city is that the center, when broadly defined, constitutes the focus of public policy toward the urban environment as well as the nucleus of urban capital accumulation and transactions. With the exception of Rio de Janeiro, where the unusual geography brings squatter settlements into prominent view, central neighborhoods are the place where urban poverty is made most visible to visitors and residents. At the same time, the city center must serve as a showcase of urban and national prosperity. If for these reasons the area is frequently the focus of state planning regarding the built environment, it is also often subject to the most intensified effects of unplanned economic fluctuations. In almost all large Latin American cities, speculatory trends in real estate and land have generated dramatic cycles of property decline and urban redevelopment.[5]

These two factors—workers' economic attachment to the center and the interests of capital and the state in promoting urban redevelopment—together make the central city a potential focus of political confrontation. The tensions are perhaps not as accentuated as those between squatters and the state, nor are the clashes as visible, but the "development" of the urban center calls forth resistance and should also be viewed as a political process. Like public policy toward squatter settlements, attempts to implement technically "rational" solutions to the problem of center-city decay disguise complex political strategies;

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like squatters, workers affected by these policies in the city center present a political challenge to the state that may not be explicit but is implicit in the "survival strategies" that they fashion and in the expectations they hold.

This article will present an analysis of the origins and effects of changes imposed by the Uruguayan military regime on Montevideo's central neighborhoods. The article will begin by analyzing the factors responsible for Montevideo's peculiar urban structure and describing conditions in the central city when the military government came to power in 1973. Outlined next will be the housing policies implemented by the military regime and their impact on the physical and cultural makeup of several center-city neighborhoods. Finally, I will consider the new problems generated by the state's actions and the implications of this case for a political analysis of restructuring in the central city. This article is based on three months' residence in Montevideo's center and on interviews with center-city residents and government officials. Informants' statements and other field observations thus form the basis for a qualitative analysis of recent change in Montevideo's urban core.[6]

THE COMMERCIAL-BUREAUCRATIC CAPITAL: BOOM AND DECLINE

Montevideo has often been called the least Latin American of Latin American cities. Not only does it contain an exceptionally large proportion of European immigrants and their descendants, but elements of European city design are found everywhere: in the Italian stucco of the houses, the poplar-lined streets, the imposing legislative palace, and the many bars and small shops still run by recent immigrants. Beyond its superficial resemblance to a European city, Montevideo is distinctive because of major demographic and spatial features. Foremost among these is the fact that in contrast to most other large Latin American cities, the overwhelming primacy of Montevideo did not result from rapid growth in the postwar decades but was established early in the city's history.

Montevideo emerged in this century as the clearest example of the group of Latin American cities described by one scholar as "exotic flowers"—commercial and bureaucratic centers whose size, extravagance, and foreign composition dramatically contrasted with the primitive, nearly empty hinterlands from which they drew their lifeblood.[7] Like Buenos Aires, Montevideo owes its rapid growth around the turn of the century to its role as a commercial clearinghouse for exports derived from livestock production; like Argentina, Uruguay experienced a large influx of European immigrants, most of whom remained in the city. But Argentina possessed an unexploited frontier and was able to diversify agricultural production, whereas in Uruguay livestock

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production retained unrivaled economic importance. One result of this specialization was a low demand for labor in rural areas, which reinforced slow population growth and exaggerated the trend toward urbanization. By 1908 Montevideo held 30 percent of the population; by 1975 nearly half of the Uruguayan population of almost three million lived in the capital, while roughly 80 percent were concentrated in urban centers.[8]

The city's role as the commercial-bureaucratic center for a prosperous, export-oriented economy was reflected in the urban spatial structure. In the second half of the nineteenth century, with the beginning of the boom in exports of beef and wool, Montevideo expanded rapidly beyond its colonial core. Rural-urban migrants and immigrants filled a zone of tenement houses (*conventillos*) bordering the wealthier residential and commercial center in the Ciudad Vieja. Continuing economic strength, combined with a liberal political order, brought about gradual, but substantial, modification of this pattern in the twentieth century. The character of Montevideo gradually diverged from the patterns observed in other Latin American export centers, including Buenos Aires. Particularly in the postwar decades, the city was distinguished by slower growth, a higher proportion of homeowners, and a smaller proportion of the population living in squatter settlements. This last feature is especially noteworthy. In 1963, the Economic Commission on Latin America (ECLA) estimated that one hundred thousand inhabitants were living in substandard housing of all types in all of Uruguay. This figure, which represents well under 10 percent of the population of Montevideo alone in that year, is significantly lower than almost all estimates of the relative size of slum and squatter populations in other large Latin American cities.[9]

The divergent pattern of growth in Montevideo resulted from a number of features peculiar to the Uruguayan political and economic order. In the first place, favorable economic conditions persisted until the middle to late 1950s, financing rising per capita incomes that were the highest in Latin America.[10] The long-lasting economic boom enabled the state, under the direction of the urban-populist Batllista party, to continue to underwrite the consumption costs of the expanding urban middle classes. The considerable protection and benefits extended to workers in the area of employment were also applied to housing. The state directly assisted middle-class home buyers by holding down mortgage rates, and these low levels facilitated the growth of sizable middle- and upper-class neighborhoods along the coast. Beginning in the 1930s, public housing programs were also introduced to augment the supply of housing for lower-income groups.[11] Government policies were no less favorable to urban tenants, who benefited from rigidly protective rent legislation. After 1947, when the rent law was amended, it became

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nearly impossible for a landlord to evict a tenant or to raise rents in keeping with the pace of inflation.[12]

In 1955 the Uruguayan economy entered a severe economic crisis from which it has yet to emerge completely. Rural production stagnated, and industrial manufacturing also entered a period of sharp decline. The construction industry was particularly hard hit in the first stages of the economic crisis. Between 1957 and 1963, the industry displayed a negative growth rate of 7.4 percent annually; during the years of mild recovery from 1963 to 1970, it returned to a positive growth rate of only .9 percent per year.[13] Although the economy finally showed a modest recovery during the 1970s, continuing economic difficulties combined with a shifting political balance to produce a sharp reduction in the spending capacity of workers. The level of real wages, for example, declined by 45 percent between 1971 and 1979.[14] Economic conditions since the 1950s therefore have not only constricted the growth of the supply of housing but also drastically curtailed workers' ability to pay for new housing or for improvements of existing housing.

THE CENTRAL CITY IN MONTEVIDEO

The changing conditions in the housing market produced a pattern of decline in Montevideo's central city. Middle-class and even many prosperous working-class families moved out of the center, often to take advantage of the favorable terms for home buying. At the same time, however, the residential mobility of poorer tenants in the center was substantially reduced. Poorer groups benefited less from public housing programs,[15] and they also faced significant disincentives to leave the center because rents were nearly fixed. This tendency toward greater residential stability was self-reinforcing; as neighborhood ties developed, social considerations blended with economic concerns in encouraging residents to stay. Another important consequence of conditions in the housing market was that owners of property in the center no longer sought to make money through housing. Instead, landlords responded to depressed rents by foregoing maintenance and repairs and by regarding their properties as investments in land.[16]

The effect of the above trends was to create additional substandard housing in central neighborhoods. Although the resident population of central-city neighborhoods actually decreased between the census years of 1963 and 1975 (a trend that was probably consistent outside these years for most of the postwar period), crowding and deterioration of buildings in the center gradually worsened.[17] By the 1950s, few of the original conventillos still existed, but many of the formerly private houses in the center were taking on the appearance of the old-style tenements, which had been characterized by single rooms ranged

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around central patios and corridors.[18] Subletting became common, so that houses and apartments designed for one family were being used to house several individuals or families. Unable to increase their revenues by raising rents, landlords sometimes turned to renting out formerly unused rooms, like attics and kitchens, or they constructed clandestine additions or interior subdivisions. Inner patios were used as common areas for socializing, washing clothes, and cooking.

The term *conventillo* was retained and applied to these new tenement houses, even though the element of rent speculation, all important in the construction of the original conventillos, was entirely missing. Although the word was used often in the press and even by government officials, it also carried some derogatory connotations and was employed in different contexts to signify disorder, lack of hygiene, social deviance, and even sexual promiscuity. Often the term referred specifically to the crowded, racially mixed dwellings found mainly in the city center.

The so-called conventillos were most prominent in two central city areas, the Ciudad Vieja and the southern quadrant of the center, made up of Barrio Sur and Barrio Palermo. These areas were radically affected by the policies adopted by the military government that came to power in 1973. In order to understand the changes that took place in the city center after that date, it is necessary to describe briefly the differing social makeup of these neighborhoods in the decades of decline between 1955 and 1973.

The Ciudad Vieja, although the center of finance, wholesale commerce, and the activities connected with the port, also housed a sizable population of casual workers, retirees, and migrants. The Ciudad Vieja contained, in addition to the so-called conventillos described above, many cheap hotels and *pensiones* that also attracted workers. Although few data are available on the recent history of the neighborhood, the impression shared by both neighborhood residents and other Montevideanos is unmistakably one of decline.[19] Cultural activities that once centered in the Ciudad Vieja gradually moved to other neighborhoods, and middle-class and even established working-class families also fled. The most poignant symbol of neighborhood decline became the transformation of elaborate, turn-of-the-century homes of patrician families into pensiones and so-called conventillos.

Barrio Palermo and Barrio Sur, the two neighborhoods in the area bordering the Ciudad Vieja and the Río de la Plata, differ considerably from the Ciudad Vieja. Once a zone of numerous true conventillos that housed immigrants and blacks, this part of the city remained racially mixed, largely residential despite its nearness to the main commercial avenue, and overwhelmingly working-class in character.[20] Because both homeowners and tenants lived in these neighborhoods, the

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degree of preservation of property varied considerably, not just from block to block but from house to house. The residential histories that I gathered for several old buildings and for one block suggest that residential mobility in the area slowed considerably after the late 1950s. Partly as a result, the zone was characterized by well-defined subneighborhoods containing stable social networks and lively local rivalries.

The sentiments of neighborhood loyalty and competition were perpetuated in this section of the city by the activities associated with *candombe*, or Afro-Uruguayan music, which was traditionally centered here. Candombe, in fact, was intimately associated with conventillo life. It originated among urban slaves and free blacks in the colonial era and was carried on in the turn-of-the-century conventillos and in other Afro-Uruguayan enclaves around Montevideo. In the decades preceding 1973, candombe centered around two small, racially mixed communities. One of the hubs of activity was the largest of the remaining original conventillos, a fifty-two-room structure in Barrio Sur known as Medio Mundo; the other was a two-block area of tenements in Barrio Palermo that were known as the conventillos of Ansina but in fact comprised one of Montevideo's first planned housing projects, which had been built in the late nineteenth century.

Although functionally no different from other rental buildings suffering from neglect and crowded with subtenants, the racially mixed tenement houses were nevertheless culturally distinguished by the popular image associated with conventillo life and the legacy of candombe. The candombe groups drew their membership from the tenement houses, and they used the ample patios of these buildings to practice for the carnival and to gather for informal celebrations at other times of the year. Both kinds of celebrations attracted an enthusiastic following of Afro-Uruguayans as well as other residents of the two neighborhoods. Spectators and participants engaged in lively musical processions that were part spontaneous street theater, part organized ritual. Crowds followed rival groups of drummers as they crisscrossed Palermo and Sur, almost invariably circling Ansina or pausing before the Conventillo Medio Mundo.

Candombe was responsible for bringing to the conventillos of the center a degree of citywide and even national and international fame. This popular image was not entirely positive, however. On the one hand, conventillo residents were portrayed in newspaper stories as piteously poor and their living conditions as squalid. On the other hand, the rituals of candombe seemed to evidence an admirable ability to transcend poverty. An unmistakably romantic image of conventillo life thus emerged, one that was enhanced through the attentions of Uruguayan artists and celebrities and manipulated by liberal politicians seeking visible symbols of support from the urban poor.[21] This ambigu-

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ous reputation of the conventillos as slums that were also repositories of folk culture would later play an important role in the implementation of government policies toward central-city slum housing and in determining the balance of forces between conventillo residents and the state.

DEREGULATION AND ITS EFFECTS

Consistent with the monetarist policies that were soon to become the common cause of Southern Cone military regimes, the new Ley de Alquileres enacted in 1974 aimed at phasing out all forms of rent control. With housing already scarce and rents artificially depressed for decades, the results of this policy were immediate and dramatic, especially for the poor. Housing quickly became the category of goods to rise most steeply in price. After the government took steps to soften the blow for tenants who had signed rent contracts before 1974, a double market of "old" and "new" rents developed. The "new" market regulations imposed few restrictions on rent increases and evictions when leases terminated. "New" tenants were also hit hardest by a system of annual rent adjustments that consistently exceeded average salary increases. Moreover, prospective tenants had to obtain the signature of a financially sound guarantor or else deposit the imposing sum of four or five months' rent. As Mauricio Kriger, laywer and principal advocate of the Frente Nacional de Inquilinos, told me in an interview, "To get to be a tenant is already to be in a very elevated category of society."

Not surprisingly, a larger homeless population began to appear following the introduction of the regime's new measures. According to members of church groups who provided aid to the poor in the central city, the homeless at first comprised mostly individuals and families who were new to the housing market, such as young couples or migrants, as well as others who had lived in rooming houses and were among the first to be forced out by precipitous rent increases. For a number of reasons, a significant portion of the homeless tended to gravitate toward the center. In part, they were drawn by the concentration of rooming houses and abandoned properties there; in part, they came because of the significant number of charitable services and soup kitchens and easier access to support networks of family and friends. Interviews with center-city residents conducted in 1982 revealed three overlapping strategies for securing housing after 1974. None of these alternatives was new, but apparently all three have become increasingly common under the new market conditions.

The first strategy involves crowding, either by pooling income to secure a new lease, or more commonly, by moving into housing already rented by relatives or friends. This strategy is disguised at times by a

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lack of mobility, as when adult and even married children remain in their parents' homes rather than finding independent housing. When families lose housing, they frequently move in with relatives. In one house in the Ciudad Vieja, for example, three families had recently moved in to occupy separate rooms of a private house belonging to a common relative. Here as in other cases, the presence of the new tenants combined with the deteriorated condition of the dwelling to produce a conventillo-like atmosphere in what previously had been the single-family home of a reasonably prosperous craftsman.

The pensiones, hotels, and rooming houses in the center have offered a second alternative to those without shelter. The greatest advantage of renting a room is that it requires neither guarantees nor deposits. But the disadvantages are also considerable. Besides having sometimes strict regulations about the use of electricity and water, rooming houses are sometimes openly discriminatory, charging women more rent than men or refusing to rent to families. No official statistics are available, but according to informants whose accounts are consistent, the average rent for rooms in 1982 nearly equaled the minimum wage (about eighteen hundred pesos a month) and could be even six to nine hundred pesos more. New legislation streamlined eviction proceedings for pensiones and hotels so that tenants could be ousted quickly for nonpayment. Consequently, renting a room is not only the most financially demanding of the three common strategies but also in many ways the least secure.

The search for an alternative to the high rents and the insecurity of rooming houses often leads to the third alternative of squatting. Abandoned city buildings and condemned properties in and around the center have become frequent targets of squatters. Evicted from one building, center-city squatters often simply move to another. An eviction that I witnessed in July 1982 followed a common pattern. Although given only six hours' notice of their eviction, most residents had already searched for alternative housing in the neighborhood. While some went to live with relatives, other families moved to another abandoned property already inhabited by squatters. Despite the generally poor conditions—most occupied buildings have neither electricity nor water—and the constant threat of eviction, the squatters interviewed considered themselves better off than they would have been living in expensive rental housing.

A case that illustrates the use of all three strategies is that of one young family involved in the eviction just described. The couple, here called Rubén and Clara, orginally set up housekeeping in Rubén's mother's home in the mid-1970s. After the mother's death, they obtained permission from the owner of a vacant lot in an outlying neighborhood to build a shack on the property. When the shack was vandal-

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ized and stripped, the couple and their two children moved to a room in a pensión in the Ciudad Vieja, where in 1980 they paid a rent equal to roughly three-quarters of Rubén's salary as a manual laborer. To escape paying the high rent, the family moved with other squatters into a house in the Ciudad Vieja, and when evicted from this property, they moved to another condemned house nearby. By this time, Rubén had been laid off from his job so the family did not consider trying to rent a room again, nor did they want to leave the zone because they had begun to depend on a local soup kitchen for their meals. Like many other impoverished families living in the center after 1974, this family had never formally entered the housing market. Facing considerable barriers to entering the market and increased economic pressures, they were drawn to the center by its unusual housing opportunities and remained there when they found it to be the easiest place in the city "to get by."

A NEW POLICY FOR THE CENTRAL CITY

The strategies of crowding, renting rooms, and squatting all placed additional strain on old and already deteriorated housing in the center. From the mid-1970s to 1978, a series of partial and complete collapses of old buildings occurred in the center city, resulting in about twenty fatalities, the evacuation of several buildings, and a flood of requests from both tenants and owners for inspections. On 23 November 1978, the Consejo de Seguridad Nacional met with the president of the Banco Hipotecario and Montevideo's mayor, and they issued an edict in response to what was termed a "state of emergency." The decree-law authorized the municipality to institute evictions of residents of any property found to be in "imminent danger of collapse." Recourse to the courts to delay evictions was suspended, and the city was charged with resettling displaced residents to municipal shelters.

The city applied the law with zeal for the first several years. Before 1978 city authorities had condemned an average of two or three properties per year; in the first half-year after the new law was issued, several hundred properties were condemned, most of them in the Ciudad Vieja, Barrio Sur, and Barrio Palermo. By 1981, when the evictions tapered off considerably, more than three hundred evictions had been carried out from over five hundred condemned properties. Two thousand individuals had been resettled by the city and perhaps an equal number (there are no available figures) had been forced to find their own alternative housing. In 1984 nearly a thousand residents remained in "temporary" shelters and about as many in public housing subsidized by the city.[22]

In comparison with the effects of the new rent legislation, which

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had placed an estimated fourteen or fifteen thousand tenants who were facing eviction on the waiting list for public housing, the number of persons displaced from the condemned housing represented a relatively small problem.[23] But the impact of this displacement on the appearance and the social character of the central city was enormous. Particularly in the Ciudad Vieja, the implementation of the new policies, followed by the downturn in the construction industry in 1980–81, created a cityscape dotted with empty lots. Many of the condemned buildings were torn down to make way for construction projects that were never started or were started but not completed.[24] Other condemned properties remained boarded up, and they were periodically inhabited by squatters. The significance of the demolitions and the continued decay was particularly great considering that the area comprises the historic center of Montevideo. In October 1979, in the midst of the boom of demolition and construction, the government revoked the protected status of some five hundred properties, including not only the conventillos of Palermo and Sur but also a number of buildings in the Ciudad Vieja that were subsequently torn down.

In Palermo and Sur, the destruction of property also meant the uprooting of local tradition. The eviction of the conventillo residents coincided with an attempt to move the carnival celebrations out of the area. The city claimed that the deterioration of housing in the zone was linked with the vibrations of the drums of candombe groups. City officials also blamed the poor conditions on the overcrowding and the lifestyles of the inhabitants of what they openly referred to as conventillos.[25] The popular image of conventillo life thus helped to substantiate the city's claim that these properties were beyond rehabilitation. Both the Conventillo Medio Mundo and the so-called conventillos of Ansina were evacuated, and their status as national landmarks was later revoked.

The government's response to the rapid deterioration of housing in the center might have taken a different form had not several conditions existed simultaneously. The first was the so-called double market still protecting pre-1974 tenants from quick eviction and high rents. Although landlords' interests were not served in every case, some owners were eager to have unprofitable properties condemned and the old tenants removed without judicial delays. To have a property condemned, however, brought with it the obligation of carrying out either costly reforms or demolition. The advantages of having a building condemned were therefore tied to the upward trend in real estate prices and the rising demand for construction sites.

The fulfillment of these conditions contains the key to the events after 1978. Supported in part by Argentine investments, a three-year construction boom in Montevideo was approaching its peak in that

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year. Land prices soared, and the interests of property owners co-alesced with those of the state and of finance capital in favoring a rapid transformation of the center. Banks stood to gain both directly by sup-porting new construction and indirectly by fashioning an urban infra-structure more favorable to Montevideo's role as a Latin American banking center. For the state, the boom promised increased tax rev-enues. Moreover, as one official of the Banco Hipotecario suggested in an interview, state planners were further influenced by a vision of the city that would support broad political goals: the new Montevideo would be a city of skyscrapers, a durable symbol of renewed prosperity.

DISPLACEMENT

The measures adopted by the government were a significant de-parture from the past in that they attempted to redefine a social and political problem as a technical one. The technical criteria for condemn-ing buildings were nevertheless left undefined, with the result being that decisions on how to implement the policy remained fundamentally political. It is also significant that although the policy was formulated at the highest national level, it was to be carried out by a small technical advisory department of the city government. This approach no doubt mitigated the political controversy surrounding the subsequent series of actions to condemn buildings and evict residents. But allocating re-sponsibility to the city government also forced it to accept the unexpect-edly high costs of managing an ad hoc resettlement program.

Because the explicit goal of the city was to remove hazardous housing from the center, its program was never identified as one of slum clearance or resettlement. Indeed, the city took steps from the beginning to avoid having to assume many of the costs of resettlement. It assigned the task of managing resettlement to the same small tech-nical office that was responsible for determining building safety. The office employed a social worker to handle the task but formulated no plan for the timing and scope of resettlement. Nor did it develop clear criteria for assigning residents to temporary shelters, sending them to public housing, or simply turning them away. Decisions were made entirely on an ad hoc basis. As the costs of housing displaced residents escalated, city officials engaged in self-conscious vacillation between unwillingly accepting the burden of housing the displaced and dis-claiming responsibility for resettlement.

The differences in the neighborhoods affected and in the kinds of residents displaced from them influenced the timing and the condi-tions of their resettlement. The first residents removed from housing in the Ciudad Vieja were taken to the former city stables, a group of large sheds in Barrio Sur, where residents had to construct their own make-

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shift homes out of cardboard and other found materials. City social workers reported that the displaced population from the Ciudad Vieja responded either "very well" or "very badly" to resettlement. That is, the families transferred to the municipal stables accepted the rudimentary conditions with few complaints, a reaction that would not later be shared by those evicted in Palermo and Sur. On the other hand, some Ciudad Vieja residents, including many squatters, apparently refused to leave the zone at all, except to go to public housing. The city social worker in charge of resettlement complained that residents who refused to be moved by the city would often turn up in another property about to be condemned and evacuated.

The unwillingness of residents to leave the city center also had implications for the city's management of its temporary shelter there. By 1982 officials had withdrawn direct supervision of the municipal stables and expressed the wish that the residents would gradually move out as conditions worsened. Despite these hopes, the facility instead took on the appearance of a small indoor shantytown, with two hundred residents living in sixty-eight households by 1982, including several families who had not been directly displaced but had moved into the facility on their own. Interviews with informants from forty households yielded information on sixty-five adults in the settlement, fifty-three of whom were either unemployed or casual laborers. Most of these residents could not afford other types of housing, nor did they want to leave the center, where many found odd jobs or relied on assistance from charities, family, or friends. Examples of this group are a domestic worker who turned down public housing to stay in the center, where she held nine different jobs; a single mother of three children who relied entirely on local charitable services; and several residents who worked as vendors on central-city streets.

Different problems arose when the government decided to evict the inhabitants of the conventillos of Palermo and Sur. Because Medio Mundo and Ansina together housed over eight hundred people, the initial strategy was to induce residents to find alternative housing on their own. One resident described the eviction procedure from Ansina as follows: "On the 18th, 19th or 20th [of December], we received eviction notices for the whole neighborhood. . . . January 6 was supposed to be the last day, but since nobody had anyplace to go it was postponed, again and again. Anybody who could afford to, found someplace else to live. Most people couldn't manage on the salary they had. We all said the neighborhood wasn't falling down, and we kept on hoping that they wouldn't really make us go."[26]

More than five hundred persons from Ansina and Medio Mundo ended up needing resettlement. Not only were these numbers greater than city officials had anticipated, but it also became apparent that resi-

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dents of the two neighborhoods were not willing to accept the rudimentary conditions provided for others who had been displaced. While the conditions in the tenements of Palermo and Sur were perhaps as poor as in slum housing elsewhere in the center, the inhabitants considered themselves part of neighborhoods that might be solidly working-class but were not themselves ghettos or slums. Long residence in the neighborhood, participation in candombe, and the close associations fostered by the crowded conditions of the tenements made these residents more hostile to the city's plans and more skeptical of its motives. One woman from Ansina expressed a typical view when she stated that the eviction was carried out "because of the zone, because it's so close to the center and close to the river. They didn't care about our traditions. Tearing down the buildings was tearing down tradition—the tradition of Ansina and [Medio Mundo]. . . . There was talk of saving the buildings, but what good would that have been? Without the people, the neighborhood will never be the same."

Despite such opposition, the current political climate offered residents of Palermo and Sur few avenues for organized political protest. Before 1973 political patronage of the two principal parties had played an important role in these and other working-class neighborhoods in Montevideo. Political ties had mediated the efforts of residents to secure both individual benefits and neighborhood improvements. One striking example of such clientelism was the close political relationship between prominent populist politician Alba Roballo and candombe leader Juan Angel Silva. While the former championed the cause of improved housing and other benefits for the urban poor, particularly for Afro-Uruguayans, the latter organized support for the Colorado party in the Barrio Sur and helped distribute favors to its followers, including jobs and access to public housing. Although this form of political integration hardly served as an effective means for promoting important collective demands, it was sufficient to prevent unpopular changes in the zone. For example, an attempt by the government to tear down local fishermen's shacks met with strong opposition from political figures with close ties to Palermo and Sur. After 1973 it became impossible to make such protests through political channels, nor were other local organizations ready to assume a role of political advocacy.

Protests about the evictions were therefore informal and mainly took the form of noncooperation with city officials and haggling to improve the timing and conditions of resettlement. In the case of Medio Mundo, a small committee of residents presented city officials with a demand for public housing. Both the sheer numbers of tenement dwellers who did not find other housing and their demands for improved terms of resettlement led the city to requisition a converted factory facility and eventually to provide about four hundred families with newly

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constructed public housing. The city not only had to contribute the funds to construct the new public housing but also continued reluctantly to cover other costs associated with resettlement. The handful of "temporary" shelters had to be maintained and managed, while efforts to escape this financial burden continued without success. In 1983, for example, the city attempted to evict some seven hundred residents from the factory facility, only to rescind the measure after the residents marched on city hall. The following year, the inhabitants of the stables were moved to a former hospital, and the city again had to provide funds for the transfer to and maintenance of the new shelter.

The burden on the government to house the displaced thus continued to be great, even though the wave of evictions had subsided with the end of the construction boom in 1981 and the government had ceased to resettle those displaced from subsequent evictions. The brief speculatory boom and the new housing policies had created the incentives for the destruction of housing in the center without providing the conditions that would lead to its replacement. At the same time, the economic pressures that had led the poor to seek shelter in the center or to remain in deteriorating housing there were intensified under the economic direction of the new regime. As a result, policies that undoubtedly had been selected as the most cost-efficient and politically neutral method for facilitating redevelopment in the center—the rapid eviction of poor residents and the demolition of deteriorated housing—ended up placing additional financial burdens and political pressures on the state.

POLITICS AND REDEVELOPMENT IN THE URBAN CORE

The transformation of Montevideo's central city must be understood above all as part of a process of political change. The advent of the bureaucratic-authoritarian regime simultaneously disrupted traditional forms of political integration of the urban poor and dismantled the legal and institutional apparatus that had permitted the survival of stable working-class neighborhoods in the city center. The new housing policies were not explicitly directed at removing the poor from desirable areas or otherwise facilitating the escalation of real estate investment and construction. They were inscribed instead in a general policy of deregulation of the housing market and were implemented through locally directed measures according to supposedly technical criteria.

These features suggest a close comparison of events in Montevideo with urban restructuring elsewhere in Latin America. The radical change in housing policy accompanying the rise of the bureaucratic-authoritarian regime, the representation of the state's actions as rational solutions to purely technical problems, and the shifting of responsi-

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bility between national and local levels—all these processes have been observed in the formation of state policies toward squatting in other Latin American cities.[27] Further similarities are apparent in the social context of urban redevelopment and in the strategies adopted by displaced residents. Throughout Latin America, the concept of the marginality of the urban poor has served as the ideological underpinning for official policies toward urban squatting.[28] In Montevideo the government's actions, particularly its decision to evict conventillo residents, also was tacitly reinforced by the popular image of center-city residents as socially and culturally "marginal." Similarly, the strong economic attachment of many Montevideanos to the central city recalls findings in other Latin American cities where poor center-city residents have been displaced. The advantages cited of living in the center or returning there tend to be the same: the center city offers hopes of employment, particularly for certain kinds of casual labor, as well as easier access to social services and the economic assistance of family and friends.[29]

Despite these broad similarities, the events in Montevideo must be distinguished in several important respects from case studies of urban squatting. First, the timing of the shift in housing policy and its relation to overall economic policy in Uruguay created especially favorable conditions for the rapid transformation of the center. The attempt to foster Montevideo's role as a regional financial center and the boom in investment (much of it foreign) in real estate and construction intensified pressures to redevelop the city center. The new situation contrasted markedly with that existing before 1973, when strict rent regulation had been an integral part of a postwar institutional setting designed to favor industrial capital and foster urban consumption. Low rents had depressed the reproduction costs for labor, had indirectly lowered wages, and had helped maintain a high average standard of living in a steadily declining economy. In contrast, the housing policies introduced after 1973 transferred the benefits of urban renewal largely to the fraction of capital represented by financial interests. These interests benefited directly by financing both public and private construction as well as indirectly through the greater specialization of the urban center in financial activities and other services. Changes in the central city directly reflected the attempt to replace the postwar economic model of agricultural exports and import-substituting industrialization with a new model of an "open" economy based on international banking and nontraditional exports.

The second important distinguishing feature of events in Montevideo is that the new housing policies did not generate a massive move to squatter settlements on the outskirts of the city. In contrast to other similar cases in Latin America, impoverished workers living in central

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Montevideo did not respond to serious shortages of affordable hous-
ing or to direct displacement by the government by organizing land
invasions. As has already been noted, certain kinds of economic activi-
ties bound the poor to the center. Recourse to crowding, which had
long been a familiar strategy for coping with housing shortages, did
not require major adjustments in expectations and social patterns. But
these factors offer only a partial explanation of the reactions of Montevi-
deanos to new conditions in the housing market. Of crucial importance
was the peculiar historical-political relationship between workers and
the state in Montevideo. The long tradition of state assistance to the
urban poor before 1973 clearly conditioned the responses of residents in
bringing pressure to bear on the state. Behavior that seemed to repre-
sent attitudes of resignation—the lack of organized protest over the
destruction of conventillos in Palermo and Sur or the wait-and-see
strategy of residents housed in the city stables—quietly shifted respon-
sibility to the state for resolving the housing "crisis" it had helped to
engineer.

The particular social and cultural setting in Montevideo's center
was also important in promoting an atmosphere of passive resistance to
the government's plans. Residents' attachments to the city center were
not only economic but also were based on strong sentiments of neigh-
borhood loyalty and tenement solidarity fostered by their participation
in candombe. The widespread recognition that the conventillos were
culturally distinct from the rest of the city had an ambiguous effect. On
the one hand, it reinforced the popular perception of the marginality of
center-city residents, which helped supply a rationale for the state's
actions; on the other hand, the distinct identity of the conventillos sup-
ported the residents' view that they were losing proportionately more
through displacement than other center-city residents and deserved
some form of compensation from the state. Another important consid-
eration was the fact that most of these residents were not in fact squat-
ters. Although many paid only a symbolic rent and lived under precar-
ious conditions, the majority considered themselves normal tenants of
a stable, working-class neighborhood. These families did not view
squatting as an acceptable alternative. This attitude represented a fun-
damental difference between many of those displaced from the Ciudad
Vieja and the majority of residents of Palermo and Sur, a difference that
was clearly reflected in the varying treatment that the groups received
after eviction.

This analysis of the specific conditions shaping recent changes in
central Montevideo supports some general reflections on the nature of
restructuring in the urban core. Clearly, the effects of fluctuations in
construction and speculation in real estate are magnified in the urban
center. As has been shown in the case of Montevideo, the interest of

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some fractions of national and international capital may converge with the short-term interests of the state to produce periodic and dramatic changes in the environment of the central city. Rapid and uncontrolled urban restructuring creates new problems for the state, however. In its struggle to create or maintain the conditions favorable to the predominating fractions of capital, the state places itself in the contradictory position of undermining its own solvency, either by foregoing revenue or by assuming the costs of keeping up the built environment.

   If it is clear that the state must ultimately take up the slack in maintaining the urban infrastructure and providing shelter for workers, it is also apparent that no a priori formula exists for determining what conditions are necessary for the smooth functioning of the urban system and the reproduction of labor, nor which costs the state will be forced to assume and which it will be able to transfer to workers. These outcomes depend on the evolution of the political relationship between workers and the state. The political balance of power in turn is not merely a function of the potential for, or lack of, overt political action but also evolves out of workers' pursuit of culturally defined standards of social and material well-being. In Montevideo the government's unwilling acceptance of the costs of resettlement thus represented a response to political pressures exerted even in the absence of organized political movements. Not surprisingly, the strategies adopted by displaced families reflected their lack of other alternatives and their dependence on income and support in the central city. Yet their reactions were also based on firmly held notions about the housing conditions and social environment they viewed as minimally acceptable and on their conviction that the Uruguayan state bore an important share of the responsibility for their welfare.

NOTES

1.   Anthony Leeds points out the dearth of research on the Latin American central city as well as the similarities of center-city housing types in "Housing Settlement Types," *Latin American Urban Research*, vol. 4, edited by Wayne Cornelius and Felicity Trueblood (Beverly Hills and London: Sage, 1976), 67–101. One of the best studies of conditions in a central district in the early part of this century is James Scobie, *Buenos Aires* (New York: Random House, 1974).
2.   Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1959); and Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Random House, 1961). Lewis's most controversial ideas, based in part on his research in the *vecindades*, are summarzied in Oscar Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," *Anthropological Essays* (New York: Random House, 1970), 67–80.
3.   In a comparative study of six central districts, Hardoy finds that all but one have experienced significant recent decline. See Jorge E. Hardoy, "Towards an Analysis of Central Districts in Latin America," *Comparative Urban Research* 11, nos. 1–2 (1985): 32–51.

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4. Edwards has done perhaps the most careful research on intra-urban mobility in a Latin American city and finds that in Bucaramanga, Colombia, the center's importance as a destination for migrants steadily decreased during the postwar decades. The majority of new migrants continue to live first in rental housing, and about 10 percent of the city's low-income population still live in the center. Michael Edwards, "Residential Mobility in a Changing Housing Market: The Case of Bucaramanga, Colombia," *Urban Studies* 20, no. 2 (May 1983):131–46. It is known from numerous studies of squatter resettlement that one of the major concerns of residents being moved to public housing is its distance from the center. In Rio de Janeiro, some of the residents who were resettled to public housing from *favelas* adjacent to the central city even moved back in order to be closer to jobs and to social networks crucial to their economic survival. See Alejandro Portes, "Housing Policy, Urban Poverty, and the State," *LARR* 14, no. 2 (1979):3–24. See also chap. 7 in Janice Perlman, *The Myth of Marginality* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).

5. For example, central-city land prices increased by 400 percent in Caracas over a ten-year period, by 800 percent in Cali, Colombia, over three years, and by 6,000 percent in residential areas of Mexico City over two decades. See Jorge E. Hardoy, Raúl O. Basaloua, and Oscar Moreno, *Política de la tierra urbana y mecanismos para su regulación en América del Sur* (Buenos Aires: Editorial del Instituto, 1968), cited in Alejandro Portes and John Walton, *Labor, Class, and the International System* (New York: Academic Press, 1981), 95.

6. Interviews were conducted in Montevideo between June and August of 1982.

7. The phrase is Scobie's, and it appears in Jaime Klaczko and Juan Rial, *Uruguay, el país urbano* (Montevideo: Ediciones de las Banda Oriental, 1981), 134.

8. Ibid, 108 and 128.

9. Alejandro Portes and John Walton, *Urban Latin America* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1976), 40–43. The 1975 census showed only 1.2 percent of the population of Montevideo living in makeshift housing and around 4.5 percent in tenements and "collective housing." As recently as 1982, city planners estimated that there were only fiteen hundred to two thousand *ranchos* (makeshift homes) in Montevideo's squatter settlements (known as *cantegriles*). Some recent evidence suggests that these settlements are expanding rapidly, however. Between 1973 and 1977, the government resettled a thousand families from cantegriles into public housing. According to the director of that program, most of the emptied sites have filled up again. A government spot-census showed that the number of ranchos in one sector of Montevideo's largest cantegril increased by 26 percent over a period of sixteen months from 1981 to 1982.

10. For a good discussion of the political economy of modern Uruguay and more detailed treatment of Batllista policies, see M. H. J. Finch, *A Political Economy of Uruguay since 1870* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

11. For a recent history of public housing programs and related policies in Uruguay, see Nydia Conti de Queiruga, *La vivienda de interés social en el Uruguay* (Montevideo: Universidad la República, Facultad de Arquitectura, 1972).

12. For an excellent summary of rent legislation and its history, see Mauricio Kriger, *La locación urbana* (Montevideo: Fundación de Cultura Universitario, 1977).

13. Finch, *Political Economy of Uruguay*, 224.

14. D. Veiga, *Elementos para el diagnóstico de la pobreza urbana en el Uruguay*, CIESU publication no. 63 (Montevideo: Centro de Informaciones y Estudios del Uruguay, 1984).

15. Conti di Queiruga, *La vivienda de interés social*.

16. For an excellent analysis of housing decay written from a Marxist perspective, see François Lamarche, "Property Development and the Economic Foundations of the Urban Question," *Urban Sociology*, edited by C. G. Pickvance (London: Methuen, 1976), 85–119.

17. Census statistics for 1963 and 1975 for seven center-city districts show a 12 percent decline in population. The drop was greater than average in the Ciudad Vieja, where the population declined by 19 percent.

18. Scobie provides a good description of conventillos in Buenos Aires in the first de-

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cades of the century in *Buenos Aires*. No comparable study yet exists for Montevideo, to my knowledge.

19. Further evidence of this decline is presented in Hardoy, "An Analysis of Central Districts."

20. Because the social characteristics of Barrio Palermo and Barrio Sur are similar, residents themselves are often uncertain about where to draw the boundary between these two adjacent neighborhoods. In general, the area referred to as Barrio Sur is a compact zone bordering the Ciudad Vieja. Afro-Uruguayans already lived in the neighborhood in the early nineteenth century and probably before. An edict issued in 1839 prohibited "los bailes de candombe con tambor" within the city walls and stipulated that these celebrations should continue to take place "frente a la muralla de Sud," or in the area that now corresponds to Barrio Sur. See Ildefonso Pereda Valdés, *Negros esclavos y negros libres* (Montevideo: Imprenta Gaceta Comercial, 1941), 141. Barrio Palermo is a larger neighborhood extending beyond Barrio Sur along the Río de la Plata. Afro-Uruguayans moved here somewhat later, beginning in about the middle of the nineteenth century. Their arrival coincided with the influx of blacks to Montevideo from the Uruguayan countryside and from Brazil. See Carlos Rama, *Los afro-uruguayos* (Montevideo: Siglo Ilustrado, 1967). To my knowledge, Rama's work is the only attempt at a comprehensive history of the Afro-Uruguayan community.

21. For a typical example of the popularized, romantic view of conventillo life, see the homage to Medio Mundo by the Uruguayan artist Carlos Páez Vilaró, "Te añoro, 'Mediomundo'," in *Selecciones de Reader's Digest* (June 1982), 21–23.

22. Incomplete, unpublished municipal documents list 244 evictions from condemned housing between 1980 and 1982. An additional one hundred cases for previous years is surely a conservative estimate, especially in view of the fact that the two-block area known as Ansina was condemned and evacuated during this period. The same unpublished documents list a total of 444 condemned properties, excluding Ansina. Montevideo's mayor recently placed the number of displaced residents in temporary shelters at 960. See " 'Peligro de vida' corren 3.700 personas que viven en Montevideo," *El Día*, 25 Nov. 1983. Public housing shelters some four hundred families, or at least an additional one thousand people.

23. These statistics were drawn from a discussion of the overall effects of the new legislation during the interview with Mauricio Kriger in "Alquileres: un tema siempre vigente," *El Correo*, 4 June 1982.

24. Even completed buildings were not always successful in finding tenants. Vacant storefronts in new buildings are a common sight. The president of the Cámara de la Construcción has estimated that some four thousand units of recently constructed housing remain empty because they are not affordable for the groups in greatest need of housing. See "La gente sin plata: menos nafta y boletos," *Aquí* (Oct. 1983).

25. Interview with the director of the municipal department in charge of evictions. For an example of these same views in the press, see *El Día* (10 December 1978), p. 19.

26. The residents considered it a special hardship that eviction notices were given during the Christmas and New Year's holiday preparations. Candombe street celebrations are particularly frequent at this time of year. Moreover, the last day for residents to move out (prior to the postponement) was El Día de los Tres Magos, an important holiday when gifts are given to children.

27. Two exemplary studies analyzing policy processes as they affect squatters on the urban periphery are David Collier, *Squatters and Oligarchs* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); and Oscar Yujnovsky, "The Working Class and State Housing Policy: Argentina, 1976–1981," *Comparative Urban Research* 11, nos. 1–2 (1985): 52–69.

28. See Perlman, *The Myth of Marginality*.

29. See note 4 above.