

VILLA 31 - THE FORGOTTEN PEOPLE IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

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Introduction

Villa 31 is an illegal Argentine “slum”, located nearby the train station in city center. Since 2007 when the new president of Argentina was elected, Argentine government has been trying to “rebuild” Villa 31. It’s a huge controversy as people in Buenos Aires arguing about who should benefit and how much from this process. One type of argument is that Villa 31 residents occupy the land illegally and that land should be developed and return to the public to pay back the costs of rebuilding.¹ However, the validity of this argument is undermined if we situate Villa 31’s “illegal” tag into its historical context and understand how it came to be. I argue that immigrant and local workers are the people who established and developed Villa 31 under a global economic context and that government and local elites are the people who gradually stigmatized Villa 31 through their political agenda under modern urbanization pressures.²³ I further propose a crowdsourced multi-media map of the Villa 31 as a collective memory of the community to remind people about its history, to continue shaping the contemporary discourse of its existence.

The Origin of Villa 31 - A Legacy of Global Economy

Villa 31 is established under a global economic context facilitated by the 1929 Great Depression, flowing labor market and unequal speed of urbanization in different South American countries. The first waves of settlers that came to the land of Villa 31 were workers that worked on building the new port Puerto Nuevo in the area. Government reserved a large chunk of land

¹ Frizzera, Agustín. 2010. "Bringing Down The Walls: The Urbanisation Of Villa 31". *Argentinaindependent.Com*. <http://www.argentinaindependent.com/socialissues/development/bringing-down-the-walls-the-urbanisation-of-villa-31/>.

² #globalpast: Explain the glocalization of Villa 31 through examining its formation and development under certain global economy context and its localized stigma through its manifestations in socio-psychological and physical dimension.

³ #thesis: Clear thesis statement with well-organized sections to unravel the thesis.

for the port project, but soon in 1929, Argentinian economy was hit heavily by the Great Depression and so did the project. Many workers went unemployed and many of them were new immigrants from Europe.⁴ In 1931, the government first approved the settlement of a group of Polish immigrant at Puerto Nuevo and later in 1940s, approved another group of people with Italian origin. However, the composition of the settlers was far more complicated than that. While Argentina started its industrialization in 1930s, the growing economy attracted not just Argentinians from rural areas to the city, but also Jewish who were prosecuted in World War II, European immigrants who were still struggling with the impact of Great Depression and people from other South American countries (mostly Bolivian and Peruvian) whose countries had not caught up with the industrialization process in Argentina.⁵

The Localized and Reproduced Stigma of Villa 31

Ironically, while Argentina was being urbanized and industrialized, the polarization of wealth was growing. Land values and rents increased so fast that those who set the foundation of growth could now only afford to live in Villa 31. Guano illustrates in his paper that under the context of a more and more integrated global capitalism in late 20th century, neoliberal ideology⁶ came to form the new metropolitan culture in Buenos Aires.⁷ Immersed in this ideology, the new Porteño elite began to grow fears and even demand social avoidance and physical segregation to keep the residents of Villa 31 in Buenos Aires away. In 1976, the last military dictatorship

⁴ "Villa 31". 2017. *Es.Wikipedia.Org*. Accessed March 26. https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villa_31

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Neoliberal ideology refers the free market economic ideology in 20th century that encourages capital growth and privatization. Globalization allows neoliberal ideology to spread quickly and leverage the differences in the region to accumulate wealth and trade commodities. People who appropriate this trend become the new Bourgeois class in the society.

⁷ Guano, Emanuela. 2002. "Spectacles Of Modernity: Transnational Imagination And Local Hegemonies In Neoliberal Buenos Aires". *Cultural Anthropology* 17 (2): 184-185. doi:10.1525/can.2002.17.2.181.

government of Buenos Aires which desperately wanted to win back its support from the citizens, declared to improve city image by eradicating “dark ghettos” villas.⁸ This action institutionalized and formalized the stigma of Villa 31 and has shaped people’s perception of Villa for decades, which in return exacerbates the reproduction of poverty in Villa 31.⁹ Ironically, the reason for the government, media or even me to discuss Villa 31 today is because of the valuable location it has close to the city center and important transportation hubs. Its potential profits incentivized the government and IMF to invest in rebuilding Villa 31 as the first location among 20 villas in the city. The same people who used to keep residents of Villa 31 silent and inferior are also the ones who are arguing for rebuilding and developing it today.¹⁰¹¹

Contemplation of History from Today

The demographic data of Villa 31 residents today is a proof of its complex immigration history. According to 2011 INDEC census, the top four country of origin among Villa 31 residents are Argentina (48.9%), Paraguay (23.9%), Bolivia (18.6%) and Peru (7.8%).¹²¹³ Since 1930s, the inflowing South American immigrants from neighboring countries had crowded out the original European settlers.

Nowadays, the segregation between Villa 31 and other parts of the city is not only manifested on a socio-psychological dimension, but also manifested on a physical scale. From

⁸ "Villa 31". 2017. *Es.Wikipedia.Org*. Accessed March 26. https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villa_31

⁹ #wordview: Explain how social elite class and government with hegemonic power shaped the stigma of Villa 31 in the city.

¹⁰ #historicalbias: Identify the bias of both government, media and I to choose Villa 31 to focus on due to its locational values and combined with #wordviews, illustrate how government and mainstream media have shaped the discourse around Villa which in return, changed the place physically.

¹¹ #historicalagency: Analyze the role of government and social elites at shaping the discourse and history of Villa 31.

¹² Rocha, Laura. 2013. "La Imparable Villa 31: Casi 50% Más Habitantes Que Hace Cuatro Años". *Lanacion.Com.Ar*. <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1640828-la-villa-31-imparable>.

¹³ "Villa 31". 2017. *Es.Wikipedia.Org*. Accessed March 26. https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villa_31

the Google Map (see Figure 1) below we can see the visually distinct areas of Villa 31 (within red frame), compared with the rest of the city. The blocks and houses are much smaller and more crowded and a railway cuts it apart from the main city. On the other end of the railway are one of the most famous tourism places, Floralis Genérica, one of the most expensive hotels, Four Seasons, and one of the most busy railway station in the city, Retiro-Mitre Station. Still, no one will “accidentally” pass by Villa 31 in daily life, nor will residents of Villa 31 welcome any outsiders’ visit.

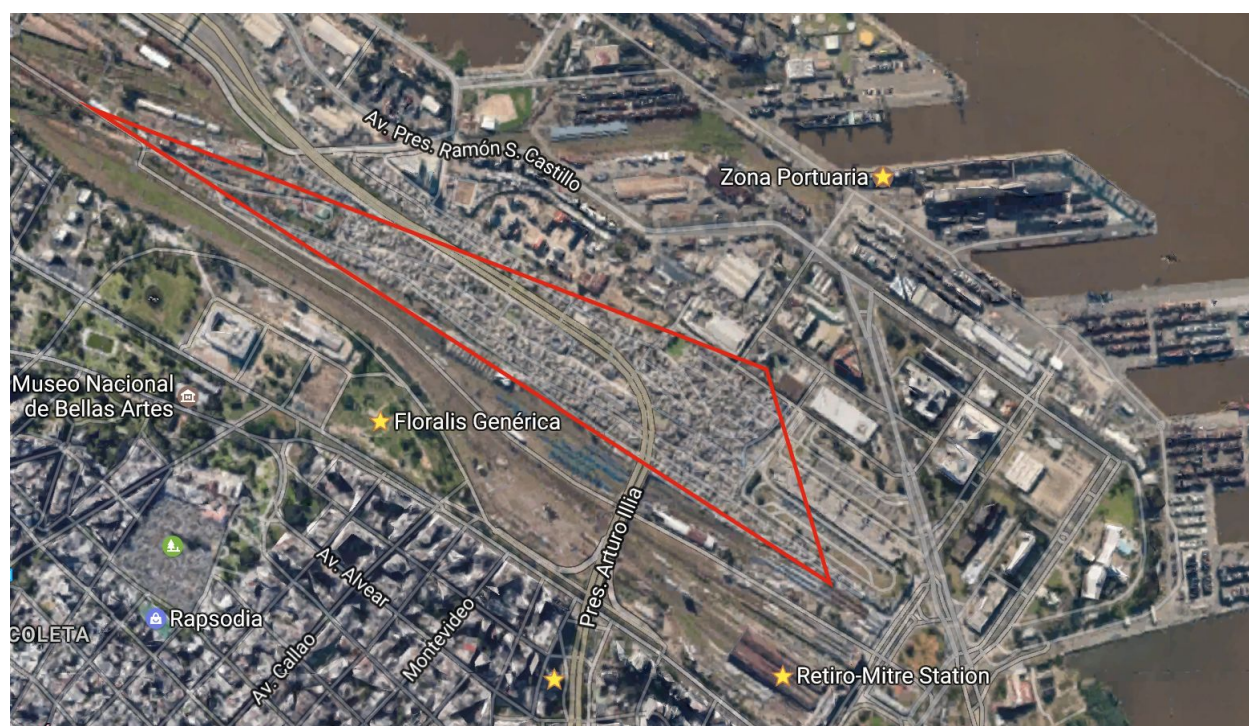


Figure 1: Google Map Screenshot of Villa 31, taken by author.

I took this photo (see Figure 2) inside Villa 31, accompanied by government officials explaining to me how they are planning to rebuild the Villa. The buildings in Villa 31 are surprisingly homogenous: they all look like building blocks that are added to each other and usually are two or three floors high. The reason behind is simple: while the population of the

poor flood into the Villa and the demand of housing soar (without having more lands to build new houses), people simply build one more block on the top of the existing buildings and stay closer to their neighbors to prevent the chance of their buildings falling sideways. Cheap steel bars replace the doors and wires cross wildly in the sky. All of these signify the class status of the residents and the disorganization but also spontaneity within such a community¹⁴. The contrast between the physical segregation from the main city and the closeness within the community curate a very special neighborhood culture in Villa 31. Many are worried about the dismantle of community and gentrification issues when the Villa is rebuilt.¹⁵ The local culture is once again put on the stage against the urbanization driven by globalization. In this special time, I strongly propose a community collective memory map generated by the residents to capture their own history before their culture fades away.

¹⁴ #primarysource: Interpret the physical site of Villa as the primary source and approach it from different angles, including its history, its relative location on the map, its demographics and its building styles.

¹⁵ See note 1



Figure 2: A Photo taken by author inside Villa 31

A Community Collective Memory Map

The residents of Villa 31 have lost their voice for a long period of time. It's time to correct the historical biases from government, elites and even themselves by creating their own history. I suggest building a museum of Villa 31 in this very location which can present a collective memory map created by residents in Villa 31. This map of Villa 31 is a 3D installation on the ground where people can walk inside it as if they are walking inside the Villa. We can then crowd-sourced multimedia from the residents in Villa 31, including photos, images, stories,

sounds and physical objects, and place them at corresponding locations. The whole purpose of the map is not just to present the history and local culture of the Villa, but also to engage the residents in the process of a counter-hegemonic discourse.

Conclusion

To better understand the present state of Villa 31, we need to look back to its history deeply and reflect on the role different agents have played. Villa 31 is born under and stretched by global economic forces and concretized differently depending on local political agendas. Today the demand for further urbanization driven by global capitalism again challenges its localization. On one hand, the government should learn from the history and be aware of how to use their power and what impacts it might have on the community after it is rebuilt. On the other hand, the residents of Villa 31 should participate in shaping the discourse of their community actively, as suggested in my proposal for a community collective memory map.

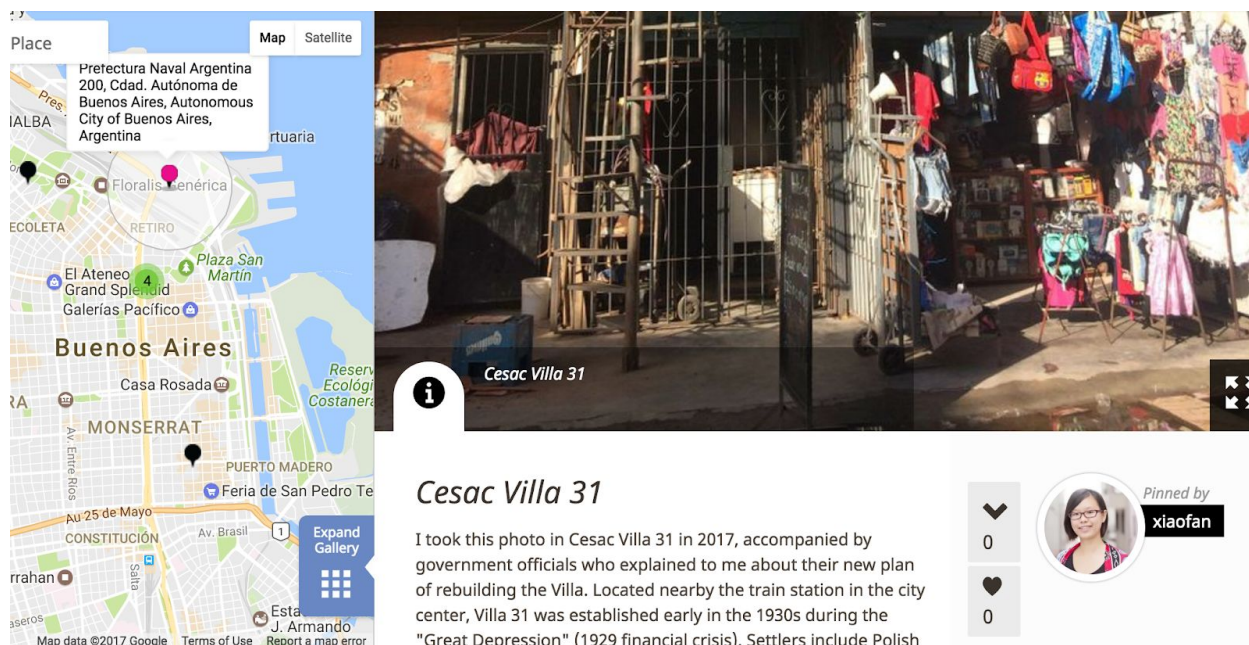
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Appendix

My Historypin:

<https://www.historypin.org/en/minerva-ah110-monuments-of-a-global-past/geo/-34.60158,-58.382083,13/bounds/-34.639298,-58.415643,-34.563845,-58.348523/pin/1068116>



My Description for History Pin:

I took this photo in Cesac Villa 31 in 2017, accompanied by government officials who explained to me about their new plan of rebuilding the Villa. Located nearby the train station in the city center, Villa 31 was established early in the 1930s during the "Great Depression" (1929 financial crisis) time. The first wave of settlers include Polish and Italian immigrants who have the government permit to use the land as well as the laid-off workers who built their home there illegally. Years after years, Villa 31 becomes the last place for the poor in the city to stay. The origins of the residents are diverse, which includes European immigrants who struggled in the downturn economy in Europe, Jews who escaped persecution from Germany and Peruvian and Bolivian who sought the opportunities in Argentine industrialization and urbanization. However, they were soon forgotten and stigmatized by the government and new elite for political agenda in the past decades.

Born in a global context, Villa 31 today is localized into an enclosed community that is segregated from the public in both physical and psychological scale. Ironically, the very reason that Villa 31 is re-discussed today is because of its valuable location. Government of Buenos Aires and IMF invest in the project of rebuilding Villa 31, hoping to both create better living conditions for the residents, but also raise the values of the lands people occupied.

My “Selfie”:

I went into Villa 31 through a co-curricular event with government officials and selfie is not a recommended action within the Villa (even photos are not encouraged). Therefore I didn't get to take a selfie proving that I was there, but I have attached several photos of the co-curricular I took there as a proof.



