The Chilean Experience: Struggling for the Right to the City in the Neoliberal Era

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I. Introduction

The neoliberal contemporary era of the past several decades has been characterized by the growth of the neoliberal city, one which functions based on market rationale rather than the needs of its citizens. Neoliberalism has become such a powerful force that it has managed to re-define the manner in which laws are crafted and implemented. It is defined by geographer David Harvey as the “financialization” of everything (Harvey, 2007, p. 33), a concept which values the market as “an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs” (Harvey, 2007, p. 3). Neoliberal economic restructuring has been characterized by a number of macro-trends, including increased mobility and shifted demands for labor and capital. These trends have accelerated the speed and scale of urbanization, and as neoliberal economic changes have been implemented, they have redefined both physical landscapes and the relationships between people and place. Land has become a good, which many of the city’s residents cannot access.

The individual entrepreneurial freedom that is integral to the neoliberal vision, argues Harvey, is deeply unsympathetic to the pursuit of social justice. Following Harvey and other urban theorists, I argue that in urban settings, neoliberal policies reproduce severe dichotomies of social class and consolidated political power. It is in this context that those systematically excluded from accessing land and other resources are led to manufacture their own solutions by producing both governance and livelihood alternatives.

Both visible and invisible fault lines between the have’s and have not’s, especially within global megacities, have become more and more accentuated with the normalization of urban planning for profit, part and parcel of neoliberalism. People’s ascribed use value of property as cultural and social habitat, come into conflict with investors’ and developers’ desires to exploit properties’ exchange value for profit. The use value of land is the utility that it offers to its inhabitants. For example, a parcel of land may provide one with the opportunity to raise livestock or cultivate produce for subsistence, or build a structure to provide one’s family with shelter. Marx defined this as that which can be useful, and is the product of human labor, yet does not become a commodity. (Marx, 1990) In contrast, the exchange value of land is that which developers or real estate speculators today perceive they can buy or sell; in other words profit. Too often local governments, charged with representing their citizens’ interests, are complicit as facilitators of a process of spatial reorganization that favors developers’ for-profit interests. As governments develop plans and re-conceptualize, reorganize, or revitalize urban habitats, we are seeing the interests of landless citizens ignored.

Neoliberal values have become so conflated with notions of progress and success, that governments’ notions of utility are entirely based on exchange value and profit. This is undoubtedly an exclusionary paradigm, monopolized by the minority of elites who have the means to participate in this development scheme.

From growing global south megacities to occidental commercial and financial “capitols,” the working class that has long inhabited the urban core is now being subjected to displacement from their habitat. Often, subtleties such as benevolent affordable housing programs or community redevelopment projects rooted in market logic are the primary forces of displacement. The property-less are lured into less-
desirable peripheral communities in exchange for housing security. This subsidization by local government facilitates the spatial reorganization of neighborhoods, expelling the poor and opening up avenues for middle class resettlement. This phenomenon, known as gentrification, is an example of the complicity of the public sector in physically displacing entire communities to foster for-profit development. This process strips the urban poor of their social capital, networks and ability to produce their own living spaces. Thus, for communities that are victims of gentrification, impassioned collective acts of contention become commonplace as a response to the forces of displacement. Contested urban spaces have become one major front upon which poor people’s struggle for permanence and dignity is most visible.

This project examines one particular civil society group’s efforts to contest the for-profit model of governance, to fight gentrification, and exert their right to space. The Movimiento de Pobladores en Lucha (MPL), or Movement of Settlers in the Struggle, is a grassroots movement in Santiago, Chile. This is a social movement of urban poor residents who are confronting displacement that is being fostered by the public sector. Pobladores in Chile have traditionally been residents of urban working class communities experiencing housing insecurity (squatters, renters, indebted home-owners, etc.), and thus struggling with poverty. MPL was initiated in 2006 in the district of Peñalolén, and has since grown into a nationwide organization. It now consists of a strong network of poblador-led assemblies with a common vision for reclaiming their communities. MPL uses a slew of innovative mechanisms to confront an exclusionary urban planning paradigm, while reconstructing the collective political conscience of its base. MPL has grown since its formation seven years ago, and now consists of a strong network of poblador-led assemblies in many communities with a common vision for reclaiming their communities through innovative mechanisms of autonomy, while reconstructing the collective political conscience of the subaltern.

The Movimiento de Pobladores en Lucha (MPL) poses to challenge the current neoliberal urban planning paradigm by constructing “la vida digna,” a life with dignity, while employing its motto of “struggle, self-help and popular education.” It envisions a city where all residents have a right to the city, and to physical and political space. MPL works to realize this vision through a 3-pronged strategy:

1) **Within** the dominant political structures
2) **Against** institutional injustice
3) **Beyond** an unjust and exclusionary system

This strategy, which will be discussed in detail later, is the foundation of MPL’s unique movement to shift the urban planning paradigm. Through empowerment and increased participation of the marginalized urban poor, the organization has managed to reclaim space and build community in a way that is paving the road for the production of a dignified habitat for all. The following analysis chronicles what is undoubtedly an examination of the struggle for power in the city. My point of departure is the assertion that the dominant neoliberal urban development paradigm radically favors private capital and the few in whose hands that capital is concentrated. Lamarche identifies a particular group of capitalists whom he terms “property capitalists,” as those who “plan and equip” space, who control policy through their fervent opposition to efforts that displace or
diminish private control of urban development. (Foglesong, 1986, p. 104) This hierarchy of power, situates the urban poor as a surplus population, in terms of their right to the space they inhabit.

As a future urban planner committed to the application and implementation of ideals of equity, universal access to knowledge and participation, it is essential to understand and document the responses by civil society in the neoliberal city. The main focus of this paper is how communities fight gentrification and policy driven by market forces. This is a common problem among the poor in many parts of the world. I will focus on the experience of the Movimiento de Pobladores en Lucha, as I think this grassroots movement of urban poor has much to discern. The documentation and systematization of one group’s efforts is critical in order to communicate the value of this common experience across borders and cultures. In the same way which improved avenues of communication can inspire the reproduction of effective economic models, so too can grassroots mobilization philosophies and tactics to produce habitat, serve as resources for the proliferation of effective socially just urban planning and policy-making. My project is a continuation of field research conducted in July and August of 2012 with MPL. The research aimed precisely to examine the mechanisms and methodology utilized by this movement in resisting political exclusion, as well as the gentrification of communities, and building alternatives to profit-driven urban development. After spending four weeks in Santiago interviewing and observing MPL’s work in the Chilean context, I came to two conclusions that serve as inspiration for my Capstone Project.

First, the tools developed and practices of MPL in their struggle for poor people’s right to the city, have resulted in the beginning stages of a shift in the urban planning paradigm. The pobladores are undergoing a transformation in how they understand their relationship to each other, to physical space and to decision-making institutions. They are cognizant of the exclusionary politics and devise and participate in a broad repertoire of contentious acts to reclaim their right to the city. This active role in producing their own habitat is a break from past atomization and passivity. An empowered political analysis emboldens the pobladores to assume the role as citizen planners and agents of change. Yet, critical to producing (and reproducing) an equitable and sustainable alternative paradigm is the presence of alternative institutions. Alternative institutions serve as independent spaces of formation and progress at the community level. These institutions both facilitate and are nurtured by the epistemological transformation of actively engaged and self-determined pobladores.

Second, the social change accomplished by MPL’s efforts has the potential to be reproduced in many other cities. Since we live in an increasingly globally interconnected world dominated by neoliberal economic development, there is much that the urban poor across the world facing displacement from their communities have to teach us all. Thus, knowledge gained through successful experiences of grassroots planning is a finite resource that must be shared.

This project documents the efforts and experiences of MPL. It is an attempt to help us understand how social movements can challenge the dominant neoliberal urban planning paradigm. MPL’s unique formula fuses street politics and mobilization, pedagogy and alternative institutions. A survey of MPL’s work helps us understand how
II. Conceptual Enquiry

The French philosopher, Henri Lefebvre, was the first to coin the term and develop the idea of the “Right to the City” almost half a century ago. It is a mantra that has proliferated as a core principle of space-based struggles for dignity by the urban poor everywhere. Lefebvre posed that the right to determine the future of the city belongs to the people who live or work in the city, not to private capital or to the state (Goldberg, 2008). From Santiago to Chicago to Durban, a conversation with a community leader and activist from any low-income community will reveal their frustrations with the disconnection that exists between their needs and interests and the objectives of “development” policies and practices. An enquiry into the dominant doctrines and paradigms of urban planning will explain the challenges that the urban poor confront daily. Those same challenges often serve as triggers that inspire collective action and social movements by the urban poor that reclaim physical and political spaces and preserve or produce dignified habitat.

City-building in the twenty-first century has largely become the business of exploiting property for its exchange values, or the commodification of land. This phenomenon is understood by urban theorists and others as the “growth machine,” a concept defined by Logan and Molotch as the conviction that place is a market commodity that can produce wealth for s/he who owns it. They contended that the city is a growth machine, and that all spaces can be exploited for profit, as means to trap wealth (for those in the right position to benefit from it). Subsequently, the growth machine provokes net growth increasing tax revenues, and improving the quality of urban life at large. (Logan and Molotch, 1987)

Logan and Molotch trace the urban growth machine to the nineteenth century in the United States, where development was first driven by the use of land and government activity to make money. (Logan and Molotch, 1987) Property markets grew in a complementary fashion to urbanization and suburbanization of mid-20th century American cities. This facilitated the homogenization and exploitation of space for residential and commercial purposes. Mass media and automobiles helped transport the pre-existing capitalist metropolitan growth machine culture to rural areas. Local and
regional governments further encouraged for-profit development through schemes such as zoning and functional separation. (Prigge, 2008) This new period of property commodification created a constant demand for governments to create a good business climate to facilitate property investment. Yet, this new orthodoxy did not greatly proliferate beyond North America and Europe until the expansion of neoliberalism.

The liberalization of national property and natural resource markets was introduced to Chile prior to other nations of the Global South. The Chilean military dictatorship collaborated with economists, multinational corporations and others interested in expanding the horizons of profit extraction. The experiment undertaken was to test the wholesale neoliberal transformation of the economy of underdeveloped nation through a sort of shock therapy from public to private control of basic resources, among other strategies.

It was in this context that local policy makers and planners became facilitators of this change, yet taking their cues from economists and other experts whose philosophy of growth was not based on market values. Rather than direct policy initiatives based on quality of life assessments, an authoritarian system of imposed austerity and privatization ruled public life in Santiago, to which public servants were subordinated or silenced and public citizens ignored or silenced. They city was divided into many districts to localize social control mechanisms. Forced displacement of the city’s poor from informal settlements was accompanied by torture and murder of vocal dissidents. During this time the planners were charged with providing permanent, yet very substandard housing to Santiago’s poor. They also facilitated reform of local land use regulations to encourage the growth of private property markets.

Planning for Capitalism is very often not planning for people. The normative processes of decision-making by elected officials and other empowered stakeholders draws their rationale from the promise of profit, rather than equitable opportunities for all. The direction of development or redevelopment, and the right to the city, has been monopolized by private and quasi-private interests (Harvey, 2008). Also, the rational approach to planning in neoliberal capitalist cities has been managed as an applied science (Brooks, 2002) by experts defining the public interest for the city’s chronically impoverished communities. The skewed power structures favoring an elite capitalist class that define, who plans city growth, for whom, and how, are products of rational planning theory. This urban managerialist culture is one in which real estate agents, banks, developers, urban planners and elected officials all adhere to rational principles of the city for profit, controlling which groups have access to resources, knowledge and space. This paradigm has become rooted in deference to technocrats in development decisions, whether as elite public officials detached from community’s real needs, or as self-proclaimed advocates that falsely represent what chronically marginalized peoples envision as healthy communities. City planning rooted in rational theory, poses a façade of public policy-making that utilizes a superficial discursive language, where paternalistic regulatory mechanisms define land use and encourage privatization and commodification of space. These policies and mechanisms fail miserably in implementing policy measures to overcome urban poverty and inequality, while excluding the poor from meaningful participation. Thus, neoliberal capitalist growth machine politics represents the same skewed power dynamics that exclude the urban poor from the knowledge and processes that could empower them to construct their own habitat. This institutionalized
urban ecological hierarchy in rationally-planned cities, dispossess the urban poor of any right to sustainably inhabit and produce space. Despite the explicit negative effects of market-driven politics described, subsidization programs and other welfare initiatives ensure appeasement from the marginalized classes and solidify a social contract between the beneficiaries and the chronically excluded.

Thomas Friedman asserts that normative planning practice is exclusionary and a cause of inequalities. He asserts that radical planning alternatives are performed at the base of social movements dedicated to changing existing power relations. Radical planning initiatives can be foundational in that they catalyze processes of individual and collective transformation that challenge dominant paradigms of power in city-building. Friedman emphasizes several processes that are key to accomplishing radical change, including social learning, self-empowerment, networking, coalition-building, strategic action and face-to-face-dialogue (Friedman, 2011). These processes can be integrated into community-based organizing and planning as day-to-day survival methods as well as tools for transformative change in institutionalized power relations and governance paradigms.

In Santiago, like so many other megacities, government social programs are framed as initiatives to meet basic needs. This discourse in fact masks the measured campaign to use housing policy as a tool to effectively resettle the urban poor to less desirable and less valuable areas. Local and national policies and planning strategies such as these, cloaked in benevolence, are extremely problematic. Especially, when they manage to address one set of claims for rights, but indiscriminately dispossess and displace people and entire communities whose social capital is their most valuable asset. As is the case in Chile, public welfare policies that appear counter-intuitive to the neoliberal project, may also reduce poverty statistically and in the short run. Ultimately, the integrationist policies both reduce the possibility for real social change (interrupting elite power concentration) and by spatially disempowering squatters, renters and others whose communities are their social safety nets. By resettling the poor to lesser-valued territory, these social programs also feed the needs of the growth machine. Dialectically, a rational argument of public interest and basic needs keeps the public unconscious of the intent of such programs.

Decentralization of development and planning (away from state bureaucracy and market logic) is complementary to empowerment and organization in communities. Grassroots mobilization has transformational potential in ways beyond the challenges it may pose to the state. Self-reliance as a core principal of collective resistance is an asset in building sustainable methods of local self-governance as well as building a conscious and dignified citizenry. It is these alternative processes and structures of resistance, reform and self-governance that together facilitate a change. This change is transformative in that successfully returns the ownership over the urban habitat and thus the right to the city to the pobladores in Chile.
III. Historical Fight for Space

A historical appraisal of the genesis of the pobladores’ fight for the right to the city is critical, in order to accurately place and effectively systematize the current organizing efforts for dignified living conditions by Santiago’s poor. The growth and spatiality of Santiago has a unique history driven by poignant battles for land, well-organized campaigns for collective consumption and land regularization, and other interest-driven efforts to control the autonomous nature of landless urban settlers. The relatively strong local organization distinguished the poblador movements of the past from other urban dwellers organized in the labor movement or political parties. This historical memory situates today’s pobladores’ struggle, and informs their ideology, guiding a revitalized movement and its repertoires of contention and collective action (Tarrow, 1998).

In Santiago, like other major South American cities, mass migration to the city from the countryside was characterized by land occupations. Peñalolen, a peripheral district (semi-autonomous governing body), or comuna within the city—where MPL was founded, has its headquarters and most active membership—at that time was agricultural land. Peñalolen, like many other communities that have since become absorbed into the urban landscape, was experiencing an explosion of land invasions, known as tomas, by rural migrants. The landless preempted these massive tomas by coordinating their collective efforts so as to successfully carry out the land invasions, initially on undeveloped peripheral lands (both public and private), and later on land slated for development as the city sprawled outwards. They produced their own homes out of recycled waste (Garces, 2011) and collectively organized to protect themselves from forced displacement. Tomas— which became campamentos, or encampments, once they became more established and permanent—were typically responded to by law enforcement with forced removals of entire communities (prior to, during or after self-administered home construction). Nonetheless, they became the primary way in which pobladores in an era of rapid urbanization were able to establish roots and produce their habitat in a society where the housing deficit, despite government efforts to produce solutions, was very insufficient to meet people’s immediate needs. Today’s residents of Peñalolen, the comuna where MPL was born, are often the children and grandchildren of the original pobladores of this region, but regardless of kinship have thus inherited a strong sense of dignity and culture of struggle and self-reliance.

Pre-Dictatorship- Popular Power over “Liberated Spaces”

In 1872, Chile’s President Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna alleged that in Santiago there coexisted two cities: A proper and Christian city in the center where the elites lived and a barbarous city on the outskirts, where the poor lived (Garces, 2011), a diagnosis not so distant from 21st century dichotomies and politics. The amount of campamentos on the city’s peripheries grew rapidly as rural migrants came to Santiago in the 30’s, 40’s and 50’s (Salazar, 2012). Conservative governments such as that of Jorge Alessandri Rodriguez (1958-64) looked for quick solutions to the poblaciones, the common term
used to refer to more established informal settlements. In 1965 under the presidency of Eduardo Frei Montalva, the Ministry of Housing and Urbanism was created and approached the campamentos as stains on the urban landscape, proposing programs such as “Operación Sitio,” to regularize land tenure. Pobladores sense of dignity and ability to subsist was rooted in their spontaneity, their networks, association and collective self-help tactics. Allowing government “operations” to define their fate in many cases stripped them of these collective virtues. They became an important political bloc for some politicians and scapegoats for others. The state’s self-assumed role as home-maker and street-cleansing agent (Wacquant, 2008) led to politicization of the pobladores and intersectionality with other movements and ideological strains. Pobladores were thus often also militant members of syndicates and radical leftist groups such as the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR). Pobladores became more unified, organized and politically active than ever, as the toma became a legitimate form of making the political by the grassroots (Salazar, 2012). Between 1967 and 1972 the poblador movement escaped institutional control entirely and large-scale tomas increased dramatically (Castillo Couve, 2010). At this stage in the poblador movement, the urban poor began to more forcefully articulate the exclusion and inequality that resulted from housing precarity, also part of a larger discourse of liberation and equity

**Response to Neoliberalism**

In Chile, Pinochet’s military dictatorship overhauled Allende’s import substitution and nationalization economic reforms and installed one of the first state-sponsored neoliberal platforms. The overhaul of the economy was accompanied through violence and the systematic repression and violation of human rights. Chile is considered to be the laboratory under which Pinochet allowed Milton Friedman and the “Chicago Boys” to test their neoliberal economic model in the 70’s. Reagan and Thatcher would then follow suit the following decade that would begin to redefine the global economic order (Rodriguez and Rodriguez, 2009). Those pobladores who continued to exert their ideological values, or simply organize against the government’s efforts to displace them from their poblaciones, faced immense repression. Detention, torture, exile or murder were the alternative to the high risk of subversive resistance. Both fear and repression highly diminished the urban poor’s ability to contest neoliberal policies that threatened their right to space more than ever.

Social Movements were dormant for many years following the end of the authoritarian regime, as the “Concertación,” or coalition of center-left parties (including Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and a number of smaller parties) provided civil society with the comfort that democracy had assumed power in the democratic transition from the dictatorship. Yet, this coalition still remained faithful to the neoliberal model and the power structures that defined it. Through reorganization, empowerment and the recovery of the historical culture of production, autonomy and struggle, MPL and other movements of pobladores and other sectors began to build power and challenge the dominant narrative that used economic and social indicators to argue that neoliberalism was working for Chile. The pobladores began to challenge this discourse by confronting the concentration of wealth and power that had been cultivated amongst the elites. In the process of rapid modernization that according to many had Chile on the cusp of
belonging to the Developed World, the systematized inequalities and lack of participation went unaddressed.

IV. Today’s Pobladores

Genesis of the social movement

This rich history of resistance, collective action and self-help is embedded in the historical memory of the new generation of pobladores. This unique genealogy of the 21st century movement of pobladores has become a part of their collective identity, and informed their repertoire of contention to protest unfavorable policies that have continued to exacerbate miserable living conditions. Their marginality though, did not provoke collective action that directly attacked the institutional exclusion and the reproduction of their poverty since the end of the dictatorship. Rather, Chilean civil society, particularly the urban poor, experienced a slow regeneration of political power during the 90’s. There have recently been seminal moments that have escalated the struggle for the right to the city and laid the groundwork for a new era of contentious politics by Santiago’s poor with potential for change.

In 1999, a massive land occupation occurred in Peñalolen, where 1,750 landless families in the district took over 23 hectares of land owned by a wealthy businessman. (Renna, 2011) This act was extremely emblematic and exposed the dialectic of the disparately unequal spatial and social configuration in Santiago. This insurgent act revived that critical approach exerted in acquiring access to land, resources, participation and social production of habitat that had been a pillar in communities’ fight for sovereignty in the sixties and seventies.

In 2006, MPL was formed as an organization entity by activists and community leaders, establishing its headquarters in Peñalolen and building power and organizing collectively from there. Assemblies of pobladores in different neighborhoods throughout Peñalolen began to grow out of social networks and unanimous frustration with poverty, limited possibilities, and a political system that simply ignored them. These assemblies soon began to spread to other marginal communities dealing with underdevelopment and gentrifying forces, as leaders shared experiences and communities identified the opportunity to organize collectively and join a movement that was developing a discourse that reflected their concerns. Today, there are dozens of assemblies throughout Chile that constitute the base of the movement. These assemblies engage in uniquely different self-managed projects, determined by the pobladores themselves based on degree of need, tools available, collective power, and the political panorama. Some are in different phases (from looking for land all the way through to the final phase of construction), but all the assemblies meet weekly and are driven and managed by the pobladores.

The field research conducted for this project was in Peñalolen, home to 6 assemblies, and in the Franklin assembly in the district of Santiago Center, or the Old Quarter. Two of the projects in Santiago’s Old Quarter are particularly innovative in that
they are occupations of buildings, called *Inmuebles Recuperados por Autogestions* (IRA), “Properties Recovered through Self-Management.” The two *casonas*, or big houses, as they are called by the assembly members and inhabitants, are considered by the *pobladores* as spaces of resistance to the government-facilitated economic displacement happening in their community.

The occupation of these buildings as well as the birth of Santiago’s MPL chapter in the traditional working class Franklin neighborhood (within the old quarter), was the result of the earthquake in February 2010. The victims were mostly the *allegados* (people sharing single-family homes among multiple families) and renters who lived in old and precarious housing, that were left without roofs, walls, or homes altogether. Government programs were very slow to reach property owners, were not accessible to all, and in many cases subsidies were simply not properly invested by slumlords. As the winter months were approaching, the *pobladores* of Franklin organized with a sense of collective urgency, deciding to take the radical action to conduct small-scale *tomas* of the properties that would become *Casona Esperanza* and *Casona Protectora*. Much like the 1999 *toma* of Nasur in Peñalolen, this was monumental and provoked a movement that has provided new frames of reference and critical perspectives to the *pobladores* in the Old Quarter.

**Who are Today’s *Pobladores***?

The base of the movement, the *pobladores*, are a demographic that is largely misunderstood. They are demonized and delegitimized by the media and public officials, in efforts to quell the effectiveness of their campaigns. Yet, the most severe obstacle to truly understanding who the *pobladores* are—their historical roots, their current condition and their claims to rights—is the *pobladores* themselves. Claudia, a community leader and tenant in one of MPL’s occupied *casonas*, articulates the challenge of the false consciousness internalized by many *pobladores*.

> *If they don’t know (MPL) it’s difficult that people realize and become aware of social class because there are many people who don’t believe they’re poor because they live here in the heart of the city. In other words, they don’t recognize they’re poor but rather identify as middle class because they have a stable job, because they make enough to pay rent, but they have nothing left to save or have their own home. They can spend their entire life paying rent, debts, their children’s education, but don’t become aware that you’ve got to do something now. And we’re working on that, we’re making popular education in the assembly.*

*(Interview, July 30, 2012)*

Many of the *pobladores* that make up the base of the movement in the Old Quarter are street vendors in the Franklin district, famous as an informal commercial district with cheap goods. They either rent and stock their own stands where they sell clothing, cell phones, antiques, books, furniture, produce, meat, fish or other products, or they are employed by a shop or stand owners. Others are roaming food vendors whose sell to
shop owners, employees and customers. Others are unemployed or work odd jobs. Gossip is a large part of the residential and commercial networks, and while the association that makes MPL members collectively strong comes from these spaces, so too does gossip and criticism.

Magdalena (Interview, August 2, 2012), a former conservative supporter of the coalition governments and self-declared “anti-izquierdista,” or anti-leftist [this is how she referred to anyone engaged in social activism], joined the assembly immediately after the earthquake as it presented a tangible roadmap to her for how to break the cycle of poverty she had experienced her entire life. Now a MPL leader and vociferous critic of local government policies and advocate for resistance through self-reliance, she hears the whispers labeling her as a “Communist.” This is the climate of passive acceptance that MPL is organizing within. Magdalena recognizes, like many others MPL assembly members that their resistance and collective action “is not only the fight for housing, it is for a decent life, it is for our children’s education and for our rights that have been violated and trampled all our lives.” Rosi, a leader in one of the Peñalolen assemblies, stressed, “MPL is a movement of struggle, fighting for a dignified life, but a dignified life doesn’t mean just to have a respectable home. It also means to have a dignified education, of good quality, health (care) that you don’t have to be there at 5 in the morning so that they see you at 8:30… and they tell you to come back in the afternoon… we are human beings and we want equality (Interview, August 5, 2012).”

This rights-based narrative is accompanied by a critical analysis of political power and market-driven policy-making criteria that are antagonistic to the pobladores right to remain and live with dignity in their community. Claudia states that, “the powers of the state plan the city in their own way. We [MPL] are trying as an organized group to plan the city and break that… It’s been years since the government plans the city in an unequal way, very unequal; where many have to leave the city… we don’t have a right to the city because we are poor (Interview, July 30, 2012).” Magdalena conveys the sentiment for the pobladores of the Old Quarter; “I never considered living in another district. I never applied [for public housing subsidy] because if you apply they send you to the peripheries (Interview, August 2, 2012).” This analysis informs their collective claims. As collective actors they are building a social movement against the institutions and the forces they identify as unjust, while exerting their rights with a sense of power and pride. As Claudia expresses, “during my life I was always convinced that there existed inequality, but alone I can’t do anything (Interview, July 30, 2012).”

Organizational Structure

The bottom-up organizational structure of MPL is what allows its members to participate in and shape one’s community every day, in myriad ways. What many leaders indicate was initially an investment in one’s self, becomes collective action, based on project-based initiatives and a broader vision of social change. Assemblies range in number depending on the capacity of their projects, from a few dozen, to MPL’s first successful self-administered public housing project in Peñalolen, which has 120 units and almost 200 members. Each assembly has a handful of dirigentes, elected leaders who assume increased responsibilities as communicators, spokesmen/spokeswomen, and who
participate further in movement-wide and local strategic planning. “As a dirigenta, one has to help people understand what movement is, where we are taking our struggle and what we are fighting for,” says Magdalena (Interview, August 2, 2012). She cherished the responsibility, and appreciated her fellow pobladores for trusting her with responsibilities. She had recently actively participated at a meeting between MPL and representatives from the Ministry of Housing and Urbanism. Here she demanded to the Vice-Minister that the abandoned state-owned building that the assembly-members had occupied be awarded to them at a fair price, paid through the collective public housing subsidy they’d solicited, instead of the state offering the property as an open bid. She had the minister’s cell phone number and called him after a few days had passed and she had not yet received a response. At the following week’s assembly, all of this was reported back to the membership and discussed by all in an open forum. This type of leadership development and accountability with minimal hierarchy embodies the horizontal structure of group process within an effective goal-oriented campaign.

The National Federation of Pobladores (FENAPO) is a national coalition of urban poor and a parent organization for smaller under-resourced groups. It serves as space for exchange of information as well as a powerful political vehicle to advance policy initiatives (i.e. public housing policy) addressing institutional injustices. FENAPO represents another important organized segment of the urban poor, indebted homeowners, and provides critical nexus to concert broader housing rights campaigns. Publications with articles authored by dirigentes, MPL’s community radio produced from an occupied property, videos and solidarity actions also help keep informed different sectors of the urban poor as well. This helps disparate groups contextualize their own struggles against the same systems of oppression. It also assists them in coordinating their efforts to fight directly for adequate housing in their communities, as well as organizing a diverse coalition of interests and movements to construct a just city more broadly. While many of MPL’s initiatives as well as the tools they are employing to effect immediate and longer-term change are particular to their own struggle, they are not occurring in a vacuum.

As they build a movement, conscious and critical pobladores recognize the universality of their and others’ disenfranchisement as a part of wider movements for the right to the city, redistribution of public resources, participatory democracy and others. While the movement’s objectives range from immediate housing solutions, to policy reform and empowerment of the urban poor, MPL’s leaders display a wealth of ideological principles. Nonetheless, political alignments have been foregone for a more holistic approach to justice. Despite this eclecticism, MPL leadership has been integral in forming Igualdad, a political party that has been born out of social movements. Meanwhile, a wholesale “NGOization” of civil society has contributed to the depoliticization of social movements, as is the case in many liberal western democracies. MPL has not only resisted the absorption into dominant political paradigms, but it is, together with other organizations, building a formal political force from its base. There are undoubtedly tensions within MPL about engaging with the current political system they believe is structurally unjust. However, these contradictions are minimally controversial because MPL recognizes that they are requisite to countering elite power structures, reflects the pobladores commitment to meaningful transformation. There is a unique equilibrium reflected in the multi-pronged response of MPL to concentrated
hierarchies of power that are socially and morally disruptive. This innovative response allows for their labor to maintain its authenticity. MPL is building power and creating conditions for both short-term and long-term reform, as well as local and macro-structural change. They are making another city possible through their continued commitment to self-help, autonomy and indigenous knowledge, while engaging in practical measures to maneuver and effectively influence the existing political order.

V. Community Development Tactics From Below

Negotiating Insurgency and Reform in a Neoliberal Age

The foundational strategic framework that informs MPL’s everyday political action grows in response to the group’s members’ critical analysis of the existing neoliberal planning paradigm. It is an undeniable reality that, today, urban development in Santiago plays out based on special interests, to which the poor are not privy. Another painful truth is that housing policy is not rooted in an objective effort to improve quality, rather than codified standards, of living. Additionally, housing policy exploits the hierarchies of right to space and place, relegating the poor to less desirable and valuable locations of the city. If both for profit and affordable construction of the city are functioning based on reproducing those hierarchies of power, the result is a moral debasement of local governance and urban planning.

What does this realization imply for a movement of residents attempting to improve and transform this paradigm of governance? How might they improve their immediate condition while concurrently working to improve this system? Is there a way to remain free of the dependency and destructive tendencies of such a system? Pobladores have asked themselves these questions time and time again as they learn how to balance short-term needs with a long-term vision for sustainable social change. An alternative paradigm cannot be a short-lived change that wanes back into the status quo. Yet, the poor can neither organize revolts nor strive for revolution when the political opportunity structures do not permit.

Thus, MPL’s 3-pronged organizing approach for the right to the city and to physical and political space is a balanced response that addresses these many challenges and strives for a holistic solution.

1) Within the dominant political structures—This philosophy is extractive. It is rooted in the recognition that government is the purveyor of resources. The pobladores are attempting to access these resources, on their own terms. This requires long and bureaucratic application processes. Example of this are the affordable housing subsidies, which are potentially useful to access secure housing in one’s own community; meetings with public officials leveraged through simultaneous insurgent tactics (i.e. street mobilization or property
occupation); as well as referendums against policies deemed unjust and the development of socially just master plans.

2) Against institutional injustice—This philosophy is reactive, yet measured. It includes street politics, from peaceful protest to civil disobedience (i.e. blocking traffic, hanging from or climbing strategic structures). It also would include any contentious act challenging government power directly, such as a lawsuit against police abuse or corruption by an elected official. As well, community-led petitions against policies and plans.

3) Beyond an unjust and exclusionary system—Autonomy of this sort inherently requires engaging with the state and business entities to some degree. MPL’s objective is to eliminate the ladder and mitigate the negative effects of the former. Autonomy refers to processes as much as it does physical spaces and institutions. The pobladores’ objective here is to develop participatory processes that are based in their communities. Through these processes they can begin to appropriate productive capacities, decision-making power and resources from a controlled and self-interested state apparatus. Alternative institutions such as non-profit housing cooperatives, construction cooperatives, and popular educational institutions are among these spaces of autonomous production.

Undoubtedly MPL’s goal is to redesign the entire political apparatus, beyond the current system. Perceptions of what revolution in Chile may look like differ, and will not be explored in this paper. Nevertheless, there is a widespread recognition by social activists that a pragmatic, yet confrontational approach is necessary for social movements to remain as relevant political actors (Salazar, 2012). In most cases, a particular project or campaign by MPL may need to draw on all 3 of these approaches to succeed.

The vision that this balanced approach strives for is simple—a dignified life for all city dwellers. Yet historical memory and political reality have made the pobladores keen to the fact that this is a long-term project that requires “struggle, popular education and self-help.” The tools that the movement uses to carry out this vision are diverse, ranging from developing community-based alternative institutions, to self-help and mutual-aid, to recovering underutilized properties.

These tools are not mutually exclusive, as every space and every moment are popular educational opportunities for formation, and every egalitarian self-help organizing tactic can be incorporated into various decision-making processes and community institutions. The struggle is daily, embedded in every last idiosyncrasy of the labor performed. Therefore, there is not a clear formula that might help us decipher what tools are used to realize which element (or prong) of MPL’s struggle for a life with dignity and a right to the city.

A multitude of tools are employed daily to realize the pobladores’ vision, to reclaim their agency as well as urban space. A thorough examination of these instruments’ role is helpful to understand how MPL is constructing an alternative planning paradigm.
Tools for Change

*I believe mobilization is the only way to convince the government to listen to us.*
- Myriam, MPL Franklin Leader, Resident of IRA Casona Protectora

MPL has elaborated a powerful repertoire of contention. A repertoire of contention is defined by Charles Tilly as “the ways that people act together in pursuit of shared interests (Tarrow, 1998, p. 30).” These tools may be physical or methodological. They may be drawn from a historical memory rooted in those strategies that have worked in the past to challenge power and exert rights. In contrast, they may be drawn from a modular repertoire, drawn from less traditional experiences of collective action, easily transferable from other societies or by other groups within the same society (Tarrow, 1998).

The tools utilized by MPL and the pobladores can be divided into three categories: *street politics and direct action, pedagogy,* and *alternative institutions.* The tools of MPL’s repertoire are diverse. They are constant as well as improvisational. They are tangible as well as abstract. They function to advance the movement’s efforts *within, against, and beyond* existing governance structures. Many of these tools often serve to construct autonomy in the pobladores’ lives, while simultaneously serving as instruments of active resistance against or within the institutional framework.

Street Politics and Direct Action

The first category of tools of contention adopted by MPL are all those that compose a repertoire of *street politics and direct action.* Street politics are conceptually understood by social movement scholar Asef Bayat as power exerted by the poor through spontaneity, through quiet encroachment and simple acts of presence, often unassuming and illegal, yet natural to their everyday micro-existence (Bayat, 2010). Protest, marches, sit-in’s and other forms of civil disobedience are typical of MPL’s direct action strategy. Direct action, or planned mobilization with a concrete objective, is an additional resource available to social movements as a method of contentious action. Direct actions are generally acts devised to leverage collective action and on other fronts, where more formal forms of advocacy and/or self-managed projects are being advanced. We will explore two distinct forms of mobilization that are a fusion of street politics and direction.

Properties Recovered through Self-Management- The “IRA’s” (Inmuebles Recuperados por Auto-Gestión) are currently two buildings inhabited by the MPL Franklin assembly of the Old Quarter. They are both *casonas,* or big houses that currently can house 5 to 10 families. Their illegal occupation by pobladores is symbolic, as a statement of resistance to market forces and unfavorable public policy. Meanwhile, these occupied buildings have become temporary housing for a portion of MPL’s members, while the assembly continues negotiating with the government’s Ministry of National Assets. The demand by the pobladores is that the sites be made available to the MPL Franklin assembly to apply their collective housing subsidy for (self-managed) construction. Herein lies the appropriation of
the by MPL of a public service, housing, which initially appears benevolent. To the detriment of low-income communities such as Franklin/Old Quarter, housing subsidies (individual and collective) are only being made available for peripheral communities where property values are significantly lower. This which would require a sort of voluntary attrition of the poor to abandon their communities in favor of housing security.

The Franklin Assembly has advanced a public campaign titled “NO a la licitación.” The licitación is the prevailing method through which properties that have passed into public ownership, are then awarded for private use or development. In this bidding process, the individual or corporation that is willing and able to invest the most capital, wins the licitación. MPL is compensating for its financial powerlessness with political street tactics, both occupying space and mobilizing to demand a just, market-value price, so as to build on that space. This approach is in a way tactically insurgent and a rejection of the state’s policies. Yet, it also recognizes the legitimacy of the state to control and distribute underutilized public land. Upon effectively pressuring the Ministry of National Assets, the MPL Franklin assembly leaders have accepted invitations to sit down at a bargaining table with public officials over the fate of the IRA’s. This demonstrates their recognition of the legitimacy of the state, however nefarious the state may be in its conduct and however inaccessible its institutions may be in nature.

Meanwhile, the IRA’s continue to be “bastions of resistance,” says MPL leader Henry Renna. These small-scale tomas are very reminiscent of the tomas of underutilized parcels of land by landless pobladores over half a century ago. Since the occupants are creating a productive space where they do not have a legal right, the effectiveness of the resistance lies precisely in the act’s illegality. It is a direct challenge to the marginality cultivated by failed market-led envisioning and policy-making by governments. The IRA is an example of the “social production of habitat” that opens up possibilities for dignity in both the project’s process and product. For MPL, the IRA’s are spaces of production for more abstract themes such as dignity, equality, inclusion and participation. Within the IRA’s, there is also a functioning garden, a screen-printing workshop and a community radio station.

Although IRA’s may not be sustainable as a tactic for the anti-neoliberal repopulation of the Old Quarter and other communities, the success of this mobilization tactic can be measured in the process of empowerment and production.

Referendum on Master Plan- A fruit of MPL’s collective organizing and mobilization is the successful referendum against the Peñalolen District’s Community Master Plan for development. Districts have a high degree of local autonomy to implement plans, pass land use and zoning laws, build roads and other infrastructure, etc. Earlier that year, the local government ratified a plan that was to be implemented, with minimal consultation of a diverse sector of the community. The plan was characterized by rezoning, increased building height limits, and encouraged high-density development of properties along major
thoroughfares in the community. In 2010, MPL managed to get 5,000 votes to bring the mayor’s proposed comprehensive urban plan to a referendum. Then the pobладores carried out a street-level educational campaign about the implications if the proposed plan took place. Door-knocking and canvassing campaigns, presence at fairs and other public events provided the opportunities for MPL to educate the community about the implications of the proposed rezoning. This political advocacy was complemented by more radical direct action. Early on in the campaign, 4 MPL leaders from Peñalolen hung themselves from an overpass as an act of protest against the District’s plan that would fuel displacement. The visibility and sacrifice provide a platform to frame the critical counter-narrative for more passive residents.

The campaign for “NO” to reject the plan eventually passed. The determinant catalyst for this victory against neo-liberal development practices was the recent election of one of MPL’s leaders, Lautaro Guanca, as a council member in the district. He managed to balance the pobладores’ inclinations to engage in informal street politics with formal political participation. It is one of only two referendums ever held in Chile against a district-wide urban plan, and provided significant momentum to continue identifying concrete alternatives for housing under a framework situating social production of habitat at its core. The repertoire of contention employed was meticulously strategized. Traditional spaces for political participation were reimagined and appropriated as a result of the grassroots and other alternative tactics. In this case though, mobilization and direct action influenced policy changes without redefining the spaces of participation. The tactics transformed the culture of participation and the nature of local democracy without necessarily affecting any permanent structural changes.

**Pedagogy**

These particular organizing efforts and mobilization tactics are not simply measured as political victories or defeats. They are multi-scalar processes for social change, where concrete political demands and goals are complemented by particular transformational processes, of individuals and communities. The second set of tools that strengthen the capacity for social change is *pedagogy*. The pedagogical elements of MPL’s work are elaborated and woven into the day-to-day decision-making bodies, construction projects, protests and other forms of mobilization and street politics. The subsequent transformation of individuals and the broader community of pobладores, are shifting the political tectonics of how the pobладores understand their existence and where they situate themselves on a complex political landscape.

Sidney Tarrow says that social movements “redefine as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable (Tarrow, 1998, p. 110).” This transition is happening in two stages. First, the urban poor themselves are becoming educated about the political environment and agents of power that directly affect the injustice and immorality in their lives. They learn to understand exclusion from political participation, urban inequalities and systemic violence as carefully orchestrated, rather than unfortunate or fortuitous circumstances. The empowerment that is realized looks different for every individual and happens in different moments and spaces. However,
the end product of individual and collective formation is a stronger civil society that contests exploitation and exclusion, within physical and political spaces. Second, empowered pobladores who are able to situate their marginality and articulate their perceived injustices, manage to educate the greater public. Self-initiated participation in local democracy obliges elected officials to listen, learn and respond to the perspectives and demands of their constituents. It also helps the traditionally passive public relate to the truths spoken by their neighbors and develop a new vision for healthy and inclusive community development. In the Chilean case, like many others, this discourse from below contends with dominant logic and creates a significant pushback to market-driven community development.

Popular education, one of MPL’s core tenets, was originally articulated as a legitimate instrument of liberation, by the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire. He proposes this type of education as an alternative to give voice to those traditionally oppressed groups of individuals who are submerged in a culture of silence. It is a method of empowerment to challenge oppressive social and political hierarchies, where its participants are both learners and teachers. The Pobladores have developed political and social analysis in ways that allow them to educate one another through the arts, storytelling, sharing of experiences and knowledge. It is the praxis of conceptual pedagogical tools in their everyday struggle that forges the theory behind power analyses and processes of understanding one’s identity, with individual and political liberation. MPL is increasingly systematizing educational projects and spaces (to be further examined later), but also strengthening their movement through culture.

Mutual aid and self-help are integral components of the democratization of organizing for social change that foster a culture of equality and autonomy. While pobladores experiment with these egalitarian methods of production and decision-making, the dialogue and discourse they are exposed to in workshops and classes gains a face. There is a simultaneous realization that pedagogy itself is abstract without application, and that collective action is minimally effective without reflection. This all nurtures a process of popular education and empowerment.

The principle of self-help, or self-reliance (also includes self-administration or self-management of resources), is embedded in the everyday practices of MPL. Freire describes “egoism” of oppressive forces as “cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism.” (Freire, 2000, p. 54) Self-help methods of producing habitat are in a way an effort to establish individual and collective autonomy from those controlled processes Friere describes as characterizing institutionalized oppressive power structures (Freire, 2000), as they exist in Chile today. They are also a method of constructing egalitarian power relationships that permit chronic disempowerment to be overcome by the poblador. She/he learns to value her/his voice as well as divergent opinions, and construct consensus.

The IRA’s, for example, are developed by a politics of self-help. The decision to occupy the space was made by the MPL Franklin assembly. That same body determined which assembly members would temporarily inhabit the building. Claudia, a resident of one of the IRA’s conveys the spirit of the occupation:

“We are seven in here [the IRA] but we’re fighting to benefit all those who are outside. They have to come give us
The *casonas* have become productive livable spaces due to both financial contributions and labor provided by every member of the assembly. Frequent mutual aid “work days” where everyone provided important labor, were initially dedicated to restoring the space. Now assembly members contribute time and labor to house cleanings, protests, and meetings for the National Federation of *Pobladores*. Costs are collectively assumed as well — for tools, services and other financial obligations associated with improving the “recovered properties” as well as with soliciting the collective subsidy for public housing. This culture of collectivism is accompanied by an understanding of accountability. Assembly members know that this is a movement for social change, where free-loading is not even a consideration.

All active participants in the movement for housing and the right to the city displayed a desire for knowledge. Within MPL, leadership development and political formation are constant processes. These processes are facilitated by the mobilization campaigns and opportunities for direct political participation, as well as productive spaces and alternative institutions. These institutions also facilitate the realization of self-help in concrete decision-making and active production of habitat in a more sustainable manner. One can begin to see that the relationship between these different tools used to affect social change, can best be understood cyclically, rather than in a causal linear manner. Yet, there undoubtedly exists a balance between a collective acceptance of this kind of nuanced participation within, pressure against, and alternative spaces and autonomous self-help processes beyond.

### Alternative Institutions

The set of tools that plays the most critical role in facilitating the sustainable nature of the shifting urban planning paradigm are the *alternative institutions* developed by MPL. It is important to understand how these community spaces provide opportunity for varying degrees of resistance to the neoliberal planning paradigm. They strengthen possibilities for long-term pedagogical shifts as well as pose challenges to inequitable processes within the existing urban governance orthodoxy. Social movement scholar Ana Sugranyes identifies a critical difference in regards to how these alternatives are conceptualized. She states that “this perspective that has informed the physical and psychological changes that are taking place in large part to the *pobladores* movement, sees the planning, implementation and evaluation of politics based on the quality of the product, and not simply from the abstract statistics of how much is produced (Sugranyes, 2011, p. 163).”

One of the objectives of MPL has been to appropriate important decision-making processes relating to the production of habitat (project siting, home construction, community development). This alternative vision ranges from decisions ranging from *pobladores’* involvement in the development of their individual habitat, to community level plans that consider the built environment as a collective habitat. As discussed, there are varying perceptions within the urban poor movement about what specifically is...
flawed about the existing system of governance: the underlying principles or the processes of implementation. The current approach to develop alternative institutions strikes the balance between resistance, autonomy and measured complicity.

The first of these critical alternative institutions that provides a legitimate mechanism for self-determination within current housing policy is MPL’s non-profit housing development corporation. It is called the “Entidad de Autogestión Inmobiliaria Social,” or EaGIS, Entity of Self-administration of Social Property. EaGIS is one of only two not-for-profit institutions that serve the same function as all the government-contracted for-profit EGIS, “Entities of Administration of Social Property.” EGIS are for-profit businesses that as third parties, have no accountability to their clients, who are organized neighborhood groups and others soliciting the collective subsidy for public housing. Hired by MINVU (Ministry of Housing and Urbanism) after the agency processes and approves applicant groups’ collective housing subsidy requests, the EGIS specialize in identifying potential housing to acquire or land to build on. Unfortunately, the EGIS and the government overwhelmingly prioritize sites, either vacant land for construction or buildings constructed or under construction, in low-value peripheral areas. Whereas the EGIS’ profit margin is maximized when it is able to identify subsidized housing sites in low-value locations, independent of where the recipients currently live, the EaGIS is a direct response to the complete discarding of the poor’s views in this process. The alternative created by EaGIS is one in which location is first and foremost the priority. The organization serves a constituency rather than a client. In Peñalolen alone, 6 distinct project sites have been identified for development by MPL’s EaGIS, of which 2 have now been inaugurated. While MPL had to adhere to the requirements that regulate public housing development, it was able to invent a viable alternative within this system that directly addresses the failures of the current development agenda and its administrative norms.

The construction cooperative created by MPL is meant to complement the administration on the front end with the construction on the back end. In La Constructora, MPL has conceived a model of a community-driven agency that is, like EaGIS, responsive to the pobladores’ vision for empowerment. This is to participate directly in the envisioning and production of their own permanent homes, within their community. La Constructora is effectively a construction company that will employ pobladores from the movement and function. The sites in Peñalolen where building has begun or already been completed have not utilized La Constructora, but have been forced to employ private construction firms. Yet, they have been collectively envisioned (fostered by EaGIS) and funded through a process of self-help.

The most outstanding element of the cooperative where capacity has not yet been built is in the skilled labor. A dozen women leaders are being educated in construction, including project management, health and safety and other important details. This is a training of trainers, since once they are fully equipped with the necessary knowledge, they’ll be able to train fellow pobladores in basic and advanced construction methods. Two of these leaders had the opportunity to travel to Bolivia and participate in a conference of women’s self-construction cooperatives. This practice of self-construction is part of the poblador movement’s historical repertoire of self-help survival tactics. Once the pobladores are adequately capitulated, the construction cooperative will complement EaGIS. Not only will the MPL assemblies be able to identify the location
where they choose to live, but also the architecture and amenities of how they will live.
Claudia, member of the MPL Franklin assembly in the old quarter, envisions the IRA becoming a state-subsidized, yet entirely self-reliant, housing project:

"We want to get to where we self-manage the resources and have our apartments that are not the same as typical public housing, where they now make them so small, they decide where things will go. We don't want that, we want to work in the construction too... for us to plan and self-manage the resources... The idea is that we contribute the labor and reduce the costs. That is what we want to achieve with self-reliance."

(Interview, July 30, 2012)

The movement is realizing a vertical integration of tasks to repossess, as much as is viable, the process of production of habitat from beginning to end. This inherently requires the exploitation the public resources and participatory processes available to poor families excluded from the neoliberal city (politically and economically). At the same time, they will be able to conceptualize how these may be improved, creating a hybrid system of housing for the urban poor through entities such as EaGIS and La Constructora can grow in capacity and/or be reproduced.

There are many other alternative spaces of resistance, some more absorbed into the current governance paradigm while others are more autonomous in nature. One in particular which is most innovative is the “Secretaria Popular de Planificación Territorial” (SEPPLAT, Popular Department of Territorial Planning). SEPPLAT is a body of young professionals that are working in solidarity with Peñalolen’s residents in developing an alternative proposal for an urban plan that addresses current residents’ concerns first and foremost. It is doing this through community mapping activities, community forums and other grassroots approaches. These are interstitial spaces that are critical to building sustainable alternatives to the neoliberal development model. Without this type of organizing by MPL to reflect the community’s own vision for transformation, the urban poor would be entirely susceptible to existing government institutions and processes. This was apparent by the zoning reforms of Peñalolen’s proposed master plan.

Spaces of autonomy cater to the empowerment and education of pobladores. These spaces function largely independent of dominant instutitions and thus facilitate the development processes that allow for increased agency and political liberation. MPL continues to build power in its base through autonomous initiatives, such as community radio and community gardens.

One such initiative is the Paulo Freire School for adult education. It is a formal space of formation for not only leaders within the movement, but working class Santiaguëños, young and old, who may otherwise not be able to afford quality education. The classes are taught through a lens of shared experiences and collective liberation, and as is the case in each MPL housing project, the decisions are carried out through a student-run assembly. Other spaces of autonomy include a community garden and a community radio station.

The diverse tools including political action, pedogagical shifts and alternative spaces of resistance and autonomy, facilitate a change for the leaders of MPL. This change is an epistemological one, where a New Poblador is cultivated. This
epistemological shift is associated with the type knowledge that individuals possess. Rather than an objective knowledge imposed by an external force, the New Poblador, is able to deconstruct truth and situate their self-produced knowledge from a critical perspective of power.

Gaventa and Cornwall explore the dimensions of the power of knowledge, asserting that since knowledge and power are inextricably intertwined, participatory research (i.e. production of knowledge) changes the awareness and worldview of those involved (Gaventa, 2001). These participatory knowledge strategies challenge monopolies of knowledge and deep-rooted power inequities. This type of active participation also deconstructs the dichotomized notion: “they” (structures, organizations, experts) have power; “we” (the oppressed, grassroots, marginalized) do not. (Ibid) The shift that is occurring through what Gaventa and Cornwall call participatory research is resulting in the gradual formation of the New Poblador.

VI. Findings and Recommendations

As described in previous sections, MPL has a multitude of tactics and tools that are employed daily to challenge the current neoliberal urban planning paradigm. After a thorough examination of these tactics and tools I can abridge my findings in the following statements:

- A shifting paradigm is occurring in Santiago Chile through empowerment and increased participation of the marginalized urban poor, paving the road for the production of a dignified habitat for all.
- Reproducing what works for MPL is a resource that could potentially be valuable for those contesting spatial and political exclusion in many other cities. Experiential knowledge of resistance should be globalized and shared between the urban poor across the world.
- Another city is possible when those traditionally marginalized actively participate of previously exclusionary institutionalized systems. Thus, the urban poor are reimagining and reinventing a different reality.

A Shifting Paradigm

The new epistemology that defines the politically active and conscious poblador of the Movimiento de Pobladores en Lucha, is a critical change that facilitates the struggle for the right to the city and a life with dignity. Yet, it is through the alternative institutions, that the practice of popular education and empowerment is able to truly take shape. Producing authentic knowledge that reflects the self-determination of an oppressed group is a critical element in facilitating social change. In the case of the pobladores in Chile, this aspect of MPL’s approach puts their struggle for the right to the city in the vanguard. Yet, what distinguishes MPL as a movement is the alternative
institutions that create conditions for permanent transformation of the urban planning paradigm. The pobladores have the tools for physical and psychological evolution, which optimize conditions for social change. The alternative institutions become fixtures that sustain collective action to the degree that it becomes a parallel to traditional institutions that have produced and reproduced marginality. Assuming more grassroots ownership over spaces such as EaGIS, La Constructora, and SEPPLAT facilitates further development of a conscious citizenry. Thus, it is the combined epistemological transformation of the conscientious New Poblador, along with the alternative institutions, that provide the adequate conditions for a shift in the unjust urban planning paradigm. These mechanisms for success are a counter-hegemonic solution to a system of governance that has systematically ignored the poor’s right to the city. This success can be used as a sort of model to assess the potential for collective action in other neoliberal cities.

Reproducing What Works

To combat a force such as gentrification in an offensive manner, that not only mitigates market forces and government policies, but also proposes viable dignified alternatives, is undoubtedly innovative. As is the case in Santiago, many low-income urban communities experiencing displacement have seen local government assume an aggressive stance toward fundamentally reconfiguring communities. A growing phenomenon, today, are alliances of urban poor affected by increasingly globalized neoliberal development policies. Just as globalization is a top-down phenomenon proliferating neoliberal policies of austerity and privatization, globalization from the bottom up can be a significant counter-force to the exclusionary effects of the dominant paradigm. A critical element to this struggle is to continue expanding the existing alliances. The experience of the pobladores is increasingly occurring in a context similar to that of the subaltern of cities megacities throughout the world. Market-driven urban planning paradigms are being modeled after successful initiatives to turnaround blighted communities by increasing their value and their appeal. At the same time, MPL and other grassroots movements throughout the world have pushed back successfully against the inequalities that such paradigms produce. Mediums for dissemination and communication can be used to share practices and enrich the repertoires of contention for communities working for reform. These include open source websites, social media, video and other avenues.

Reproduction of one group’s experience may not be a practical option. Yet, there are many valuable lessons a group in Chicago or Mumbai that is fighting gentrification may be able to learn from the approach and tools that MPL has utilized to shift the urban planning paradigm in Chile.

Another City is Possible

An important question to address is the degree to which in fact the pobladores of MPL are managing to catalyze a wholesale change. Is this the beginning of an overhaul
to a system of urban governance that is inherently unjust at its core? Or is the solution too negotiated to shift the values that define how cities like Santiago are spatially and socially composed?

Daniela, an MPL leader, identifies three critical faculties that self-reliance enables in the community in its struggle for “la vida digna.” 1) The ability to wage a struggle where the protagonists are those who are direct stakeholders in the movement, 2) The ability to develop a proposal; a real response that derives directly from the social actors themselves, and 3) the ability to administrate public resources (Toro, 2011, p. 182).

MPL acknowledges that the state holds the resources that would permit MPL to realize its housing projects. Yet, it also asserts that those resources belong to the pobladores; that they are a product of their taxes and their labor. This principled assertion that individuals and communities deserve to live with dignity is the driving force behind the empowerment and transformation that the pobladores continue to undergo. The egalitarian habitats that MPL is constructing can be reflected in the language of rights that has permeated civil society in these communities.

The pobladores are reconstituting a civil society in the image of their predecessors, who built Santiago occupying terrains and self-administering limited resources to build community. Collectivity and camaraderie defined the spirit behind the tomas and the resulting campamentos and poblaciones decades ago. It is through a concerted recovery of this methodology that the pobladores are confronting the capitalist ideals that have neutralized them for decades. This change is immensely threatening to a social order that for the last 40 years has largely immobilized a passive citizenry. Now, active participation by those traditionally marginalized is the distinguishing feature of every element of MPL’s struggle to build the just city.

VII. Conclusion

I chose to examine the efforts of MPL because they represent the vanguard of collective action to produce sustainable change in how cities and communities are imagined and planned. What makes them different from other groups resisting the gentrification of their communities is precisely that the fight they are waging is not a defensive one. The innovation that make MPL a valuable model are embedded in their 3-pronged approach. The production of space, leadership and structures is innately offensive, while complementary to approaches that are more resistant and preservationist. The three prongs to community organizing for a life with dignity simultaneously and intersect to provide solutions that do much more than satisfy immediate needs.

The efforts of MPL make possible long-term solutions to the exclusionary institutionalized systems of urban planning and development, precisely because of the democratization of decision-making and degree of active participation and sense of ownership espoused by the pobladores and pobladoras. The collective action present in the everyday structures of this movement is critical for effective organizing for social justice. The collective decision-making, mutual aid and self-help processes elicit a natural sense of empowerment, and subsequently leadership, that produces critical and
committed leaders. The residents of these communities undergoing profound change are learning to both understand the need to pressure the state to democratize its policies as well as create a new culture of independence; by engaging in production of habitat, participating “within” the system and advocating for resources and policy reforms.

Ultimately, the most essential variable in the MPL’s scheme is the transformation of impoverished victim (of displacement) into empowered citizen. Whether meeting with government officials to demand affordable housing subsidies in the community, or door-knocking and public speaking engagements to educate fellow citizens about unjust zoning proposals, the collective actors are representing themselves and their own interests. As opposed to defensive strategies against gentrification, the individuals affected by gentrification in Santiago have become community activists, planners and visionaries while simultaneously establishing a set of alternative structures, networks and processes that facilitate a paradigm shift toward inclusionary and revitalizing planning both for and by the urban poor.
References


