

De anticuarios, ambulantes, y artesanos: una lucha de clases globalizada en el barrio de San Telmo.

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Cita:

Jacob Lederman (2013). *De anticuarios, ambulantes, y artesanos: una lucha de clases globalizada en el barrio de San Telmo*. X Jornadas de Sociología. Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires.

Dirección estable: <https://www.aacademica.org/000-038/73>

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Resumen¹

De anticuarios, ambulantes, y artesanos: una lucha de clases globalizada en el barrio de San Telmo

En este artículo se analizan las pugnas por la pertenencia en el barrio de San Telmo en la ciudad de Buenos Aires, tomando como punto de partida que el espacio en sí redistribuye recursos a los que pueden apelar para construir esta pertenencia. En un contexto de un fuerte flujo de turismo internacional y un estado local que privilegia los modelos neoliberales de desarrollo en el centro histórico, reviso algunos conceptos acerca de los intereses de los distintos actores y clases sociales en el barrio. Cuestionando la vieja antinomia entre los desarrolladores inmobiliarios y comerciantes por un lado y sectores populares por otro, delinea una esquema de tipología más abarcativa e histórica. Distingo entre a los que se les llama “patrimonialistas clásicos”, que entienden sus intereses en forma contraria a varios sectores populares pero también divergentes al estado local neoliberal; “artesanos progresistas” que enfrentan el estado local de manera discursiva pero derivan ciertos beneficios de su proyecto y finalmente, los sectores populares. Alguno de ellos se les llama “vanguardia popular” ya que reconocen que sus intereses se encuentran perjudicados por otros sectores pero perciben el poder simbólico de lo popular en un barrio supuestamente caracterizado por su autenticidad histórica. Este sector adapta su discurso para insertarse en los repertorios simbólicos que más poder de legitimización tienen, derivando beneficios materiales pero enfrentando de manera poco lineal los otros sectores.

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INTRODUCTION

I am standing on the 1000 block of Defensa early on a Sunday morning when Hilda approaches David, a representative of a local artisan collective operating exclusively during the Sunday crafts fair in San Telmo. Hilda is in her late 30s and lives in the neighborhood. Unlike many of the artisans working on this block of Defensa she does not appear to be college educated or to possess a particular political orientation. But she too would like to sell on Defensa and has been told to speak with David about acquiring a spot. “Not today” she is told, “come back next week early in the morning to see if there is a spot available”. “What is it that you sell?” David asks. “You know, these headbands like the one I’m wearing.” David looks skeptical. “Yeah ok, well come back next week, but you know you have to make them yourselves, nothing from Once can be sold on this block.”

Spots on the street are not easy to come by. Merchants from the local antique stores have become increasingly frustrated with the vendors recently and authorities from the ministry of public space have been active in the area, harassing artisans who are outside of the square block permitted by the Museum of the City to sell on Sundays. Vendors avoid entrances to stores and make sure to situate themselves on the street and not the sidewalk. But this situation hardly resembles the most ossified narratives (Brenner 2003) of gentrification. Antique dealers indeed represent the first round of gentrifiers beginning in the 1970s, yet despite their higher class background and ownership of many of the neighborhood’s prime real estate, they are firmly opposed to the globalizing process of urban renewal taking place in the district today.

Paradoxically, rather than aligning themselves with real estate interests and boosters among the local state, they see their interests represented in a pre-globalized neighborhood in which tourists

were scarce but spent more and the neighborhood was visited by deep pocketed residents from the city's northern neighborhoods.

Neighborhood Change: Paradigms that Travel

This paper represents an attempt to delineate some of the tensions in the literature on gentrification and its engagement with so-called global south contexts, while more broadly critiquing the typologies of urban change that circulate globally. Departing from the most orthodox conceptions of gentrification, this article points to the conceptual value of reclaiming the term accumulation strategies (Harvey 1987) as an alternative engagement with urban revalorization, for it grapples with processes of creative destruction in the built environment in ways that more adequately account for local context. For one, this framework represents a more useful “strategic essentialism,” (Spivak 1988) by dismantling binaries and accounting for contentious politics, regimes of economic development, and state-urban policy in variegated neoliberalizing contexts (Brenner and Theodore 2002). Second, this approach allows for a more meaningful assessment of class relations in globalizing spaces by eschewing the analytic rigidity inherited from the literature on gentrification. I show how in a globalizing tourist district of Buenos Aires, class relations hardly cohere to the binary of real-estate interests vs. popular actors, articulated through the politics of displacement and the interventions of a neoliberal state. Rather these relations demonstrate far more complex dynamics between shop owners, popular actors and artisans, as well as a neoliberal local state. But in each of these cases, they are also deeply mediated by macroeconomic dynamics, international tourism flows, the cost of local credit (Brenner et al 2010), and the relative strength of various social movements (Di Virgilio 2012) and popular actors.

In part this perspective also responds to the need to grapple with new political-economic formations of culture that urban researchers have yet to fully interrogate in the context of neighborhood upgrade. The critical literature on “culture” has barely entered into discussions of political economy and urban space. It is taken for granted by most urban sociologists that the marketing of identities, the commodification of particular cultural forms, and the building of major arts institutions is central to a new form of city building (see Gotham 2005 for an overview). Yet these accounts generally assume the mere instrumentality of culture itself. As a point of departure, Yúdice (2003: 17) suggests that there are new forms of value that are produced, expropriated, or denied as “cultural and mental labor...become the basis of a new division of labor” (*ibid*: 19). And as Young (2002) notes, the stakes of culture are often political in the broadest sense, such that “much of the ground for conflict between culturally differentiated groups is not cultural, but a competition over territory, resources, jobs” (p. 91).

Culture is by its very ontology situated locally and thus provides a type of monopoly rent (Harvey 2009); in other words, by its particular nature it is never fully fungible despite its increasingly commercialized forms. In this sense, local culture has become a particularly valorized commodity in the global economy, mobilized by a hierarchy of culturally differentiated cities. Yet stemming from this local particularism, it also profoundly impacts and restructures the meanings of local identity, nationalisms, and contentious politics. In this way, struggles over representation and meaning are key to interpreting the transformation of cities and the forms of inclusion and exclusion that characterize them as they construct competitive urban policies.

ARTISANS, VENDORS, ANTIQUE DEALERS: SITUATING THE LOCAL CONTEXT

Dynamics of disinvestment and renewal in the south of Buenos Aires have been the topic of significant scholarly interest and debate (see for example Herzer et al 2005; 2012; Centner 2012a; Guevara 2006; Di Virgilio 1999). This paper seeks to expand upon this literature by looking specifically at the politics of value and spatial legitimacy that have been produced through the *commercial* gentrification of San Telmo. By legitimacy I refer to the ability of certain groups to physically insert themselves into beneficial capital flows, especially those connected to the lucrative local tourist economy. Space itself physically redistributes advantages to those able to claim a legitimate right or belonging in certain places at certain times (Center, 2012), and thus provides material benefit to those capable of invoking this legitimacy.

The Sunday artisan fair dates to the 1970s and is profoundly connected to broader processes of renewal in the neighborhood. Far from representing the kind of large-scale macroeconomic changes often cited as the *sine qua non* of urban upgrade in the North American context, the repurposing of San Telmo seems to have been significantly impacted by the role of particular individuals. The architect and founder of the Museum of the City, José María Peña is remembered for his single-minded focus on preserving the heritage of the neighborhood. “He was a ball-breaker (*hinchita pelotas*)” remembers Marcos, an octogenarian antique dealer on Defensa for the last 30 years. “He used to come into your store and make sure you hadn’t changed anything, you know, that if you were doing repairs or putting in a new window or whatever, he wanted to make sure you were doing it according to the original blueprints of the building.” These interventions in the neighborhood, however, were not neutral. They were anchored in conceptions of a district that strove to preserve its middle-class status against a tide of creeping marginality and depopulation. In part, the decay of the neighborhood suggests that by the 1970s there was an important “rent gap” (Smith 1995). The plans for a Le Corbusier inspired

transformation of the south dating back to the 1950s had been halted due to a lack of city funds. Owners and stakeholder in the neighborhood assumed expropriation and demolition was imminent and therefore there was little incentive to invest in the upkeep of the built environment.

Antique Dealers: “Patrimonialistas Clásicos”/Unlikely Neoliberal Holdouts

The unintended consequences of Peña’s intervention, the reorientation of the Museo de la Ciudad with him at its head, and the creation of the Sunday antique fair served to legitimize the presence of a petit bourgeois class of antique store owners in the neighborhood. But these social groups did not necessarily benefit from the subsequent globalizing sectors of the tourist economy. Their business was anchored locally as a destination for the city’s more privileged residents and certain wealthy tourists “in the know.” As Diego puts it, “The tourists today are *medio pelo*. They come and want to spend a few dollars on some junk. None of them are going to come and spend u\$s3000 on a nice piece. Before it was different. Before the tourists were of a different level. Those of us who can stay on the street own here. If not, we can’t afford it. They want 4,000 *dollars* a month for rent now. We are in a constant war with the vendors. They don’t pay taxes... There are battles that are won or lost. But it is a war.” This situation appears paradoxical. Antique dealers are some of the areas most privileged sectors. Many of them own in the neighborhood and benefit from the district’s rising prices. The literature would suggest that this group would be some of the neighborhood’s most important boosters, aligned with the entrepreneurial approach of the local state and disinclined to support the area’s residents in risk of displacement.

To understand this paradox it is necessary to perceive two components of the neighborhood’s current transformation. This transformation brings together important insights

into the material benefits that accrue to those able to claim legitimacy in urban space. For one, it requires us to consider the territory's transformation within broader macro-economic structures and social transformations. San Telmo's connection to the city's most globalized sector of the international tourist economy is in part linked to the restructuring of Puerto Madero. While space limits a full consideration of the underlying institutional and economic factors which catalyzed this intervention (see Ciccolella and Mignaqui, 2002; Torres 2002 for an overview), it is sufficient to mention that the conversion of an old port of Buenos Aires was the result of an effort to insert the city into a rather different set of capital flows tied to international finance and certain producer services. Quite in line with the economic transformation of the nation, as well as the cultural ethos of the highflying 1990s in Buenos Aires, the areas of San Telmo that were most impacted were those further north and east, closest to the institutional and financial hub of the city. During this period small-scale specialized tourism, particularly business visitors, fueled the strengthening of San Telmo as a high quality antique enclave.

The devalued exchange rate of the post crisis (2001/2002) period brought about a different kind of commerce in the neighborhood that not only required new forms of consumption but also entirely new regimes of cultural production and representation. While the Sunday fair had a long history in the neighborhood it now represented for many a new source of income common in the face of the "new poverty" (Perelman and Boy, 2010; Feijoó 2003) produced in the aftermath of economic crisis. But more importantly, it brought together the increasing number of international tourists with a different profile than those of the pre-crisis period. As Daniel, an antique dealer in the neighborhood for some 20 years puts it, "These new tourists don't want antiques, they are interested in more modern looks, like that sold in the design stores. But that stuff is all fake, it's junk, its not even made by the owners, it's bought from

wholesalers (*mayoristas*). These tourists would shop at Isadora. They don't know the difference." While many antique dealers claim that they are in the process of being displaced, in fact the Association of Antique Dealers registers some 374 antique shops in the neighborhood, hardly changed from 10 years prior. However, as rents have risen on the traditional *calle* Defensa, many have moved to smaller shared spaces and multi-shop commercial galleries.

The local state has taken significant steps to ensure the upgrade of the historic center through increased policing, the building of arts institutions and the rezoning of the district for cultural purposes. Yet the city's entrepreneurial model of urban protection and upgrade demonstrates the tensions that arise between the desire to preserve the city's patrimony and the need to commodify historical spaces as a tool of neoliberal urban policy. While a desire to preserve San Telmo generated through the Museo de la Ciudad in the 1970s was largely a result of those interested in issues of architectural preservation, aided by the arrival of local antique dealers, the cause has since been taken up by far more entrepreneurial actors. As one informant in the Dirección General Casco Histórico (under the Ministry of Culture) put it, the tradition institutions of the city connected to built forms of culture and patrimony have been emptied (*vaciado*) due to their lack of entrepreneurial vision, while ministries such as Public Space, Economic Development, and Urban Development, have been empowered in central districts of the city. A paradox thus emerged: antique dealers and the local state would seem to share an interest in security, higher land values, and the commercial revalorization of the neighborhood, yet the current conjuncture pits traditional *patrimonialistas* (including antique dealers and the disenfranchised members of the ministries of culture and the secretary of patrimony) against the interventions of the local state. These original sectors share a heritage-based appreciation of the neighborhood that sees its renovation as a necessity for preserving local culture, rather than as a

tool of urban accumulation. As I outline below, the commodification of neighborhood culture and the development of a kind of mass tourism promoted by the city paradoxically undermines antique dealers' traditional business.

Progressive Artisans: Tenuous Privilege

While artisans may appear to be the most precarious laborers in this new economy – subject to threat, eviction, and harassment by authorities – there are a number of differentiated positions which impact their ability to generate advantages through their use of public space in San Telmo. The production of artistic value is, of course, highly symbolic and a process of intense social construction. The ability of artisans on the *calle* Defensa to earn a living is deeply interwoven with their invocation of certain legitimizing identities and the value these identities generate in the marketplace. Artistic goods themselves exist within particular discursive formations, appealing to various meanings and scales: positioning local artistic production within a broader global cosmopolitanism or conversely, the particularism of local Argentine “indigineity”. In each of these cases, artisans are able to garner different prices based on how these representations intersect with the imputed meanings and identities of various publics.

Let us take for example the case of two artisans both of which have positioned themselves within the most lucrative circuits of the Feria's artisan market. Pablo is an artist by trade who has been selling on the *calle* Defensa for the last three years and at fairs throughout the city since 2003. His cement pottery is carefully painted with austere, minimalist colors and he remarks that his clients are mostly European and particular types of North Americans – not Brazilians who prefer “flashier” kinds of art. In the past he and his partner owned a number of stores and galleries where he sold his art (“I'm not a businessman, I'm an artist” he remarks with

regard to the fate of the spaces). The owner of the formal gallery in front of where he sells generally gives street artisans a hard time but he has come to an arrangement with them whereby Pablo pays a small amount to use the sidewalk in front of the store.

Work on the *calle* Defensa does not just involve the transactional process of buying and selling but also the more intense labor of performance. As Wouters (1989) notes in his study of flight attendants, the labor of these artisans requires “emotional labor” – the active performance of artisanship that departs from the more transactional work of those selling pre-manufactured goods. As a middle-class artist selling to a mostly middle-class public, Pablo is able to generate value through a particular kind of alignment of expectations and performance with his public. His demeanor is calm, not that of someone trying to make the “hard sell”. He does not come across as needing to make a sale – he watches confidently over his goods, sometimes answering a question in English, French, or Spanish. His class location also affords him certain privileges within the structure of the artisan fair. There is a dense network of organizations, artists, and activists who claim these spaces in the name of popular forms of labor – *la economía popular* in the parlance of the most politically involved – that provide certain benefits to those with these connections. Streets are self-organizing, sometimes through a collective, sometimes through tenure on the block, sometimes through activists who have long struggled for their right to work on the block. Pablo’s ability to remain is in part connected to his privileged access to these networks, as we will see in the case of those with less valuable networks.

Let us contrast Pablo’s circumstances with that of Jesús, a Peruvian artist in his mid-40s who paints scenes of indigenous life in his home country. Jesús has been in Argentina for three years and has sold in San Telmo for two. At first he sought to sell his paintings with the other *artistas plásticos* that surround the Plaza Dorrego, the most prized location for the Sunday fair.

The *artistas plásticos* are regulated by the museum of the city, subject to an exam and the evaluation of their art by a museum committee prior to being given a license. These artists told Jesus that he could not stay there, that he should move to the street side of the street dedicated to the art of *pueblos originarios*. This street is tenuously regulated by the Ministry of Public Space and is one of the few streets legally open to vending; yet it does not require any formal evaluation. Here Jesus was told by other vendors that he could only have a table once per month.

The differentiated access to these privileged locations is policed as much by valuable networks and access to particular artistic forms, as it is by the neoliberal local state, which has sought to intervene in the neighborhood with projects that contain different entrepreneurial tactics, such as replacing the street artisans with tables from local restaurants. Claudio who works on the same street as Jesus selling mate gourds makes clear how internal politics intersect with repertoires of value and privileged access to urban space. Claudio describes how the byzantine system of permits works in reality and he casts his own engagement in this process as one of inclusion. “The city has a list you know of people waiting to sell here, but in reality we really organize ourselves – we are *auto-gestionado*. When we have an open space we usually prefer to give it to someone we know or someone who has sold here before. This way we don’t have to go through the city. They don’t really care you know.” This informal organization is useful for producing spaces outside the logic of state regulation and control, yet in other ways it reproduces certain class-based privilege. The oldest and most politically active artisans tend to be middle class – in the case of Claudio previously employed full-time in the “formal” labor market prior to the economic crisis of 2001/2002. Unlike some of the more privileged artisans such as Claudio, Jesus works during the week at a *panadería* in order to make ends meet.

Class relations do not merely form the basis of access. They also structure the social relations and production of value that is available to different subjects. This production of value always exists in dialogue with the identities and forms of distinction under which tourists and buyers operate. Like Pablo, Jesus also takes a distant approach to tourists eyeing his work. He is demure and answers questions only when asked. The value of his paintings (which sell for around 300 pesos) is not necessarily related to his similar class location to the public, but rather his distance from them. It is through navigating these subtle regimes of meaning and representation that allows differentiated groups of artisans to generate value. These meanings are, of course, constantly in flux, and they must cohere to the expectations and identities of the buyers themselves.

Table 1. Preliminary construction of the production of value at the Sunday fair

Lower value	Higher Value
Functional	Decorative
Manufactured	“Hand-made”
Identifiable production process	Unknowable/Aural
Non-place(able)	Localist discourse

Because the public itself is generally middle-class, sellers who wish to create high levels of symbolic (and eventually monetary) value must engage in particular performances of the self. For Pablo and Jesús these performances are necessarily quite different. Pablo’s appeal to the aural/unknowable (Benjamin, 1955) is in a sense characterized by a broader hegemonic conception of the artist as himself/herself middle class and engaged in a process of production

that is characterized not by functionality but by aesthetic concerns. Jesús too appeals to this type of imaginary. Though in his case it is the unknowability of a differentiated social identity and location that seems to produce value for the middle-class public. Among a cosmopolitan audience, scenes of *campesinos* from his homeland are likely to be valued not necessarily for their purported aural purity but for their localist discourse, which may appear unknowable to his audience. Pablo for example characterizes European tourists as the having the highest status and most cultivated artistic taste, while Brazilians were perceived to be at the bottom of this hierarchy. Yet in my observation of Jesús' stand, Brazilian tourists seemed to be among the most likely to stop and consider purchasing his art. These cases illustrate the constant negotiation that takes place around the performance of legitimate artistic identities and the intertwined nature of performance and the public.

Operating between the openly hostile camps of antique dealers and street artisans are the few privileged vendors with permits from the Museum of the City. As an administrator at the museum points out to me, while these permits are purportedly distributed on a democratic basis – by raffle, artistic merit, and subject to space availability – in reality, the permits are nearly impossible to obtain. The majority were given out to vendors who participated when the fair began some 40 years ago and thus their availability is predicated on the rare exit of a vendor, most often due to death. Since these vendors are required to sell antiques in the central square, they are most often connected to the antique dealers or they themselves have antique stores. Like many of the storeowners, they lament the democratization of the fair, the profile of the new tourists, and the artistic skills of the newer artisans.

The vendors in the plaza are thus more invested in the *patrimonialista* discourse, seeing themselves as pioneers of the neighborhood's revival based on architectural appreciation

and not culturally insensitive commerce, as is purportedly the case today. While many of the more privileged sectors of artisans stress that they work all week to sell on Sunday – “this is not a hobby, it’s a trade (*oficio*)” – the most privileged tend to live not from the profits of their Sunday sales. In short, for them this *is* a hobby. In contrast, for the least privileged sectors, this is neither hobby nor trade; it is a means of extra income when they are not working at other poor-paying jobs during the week. Among the old-time vendors with permits, their conception of the fair as a space of entertainment and local culture is concretized in their ability to legitimate these notions through their connections to local institutions, such as the Museum of the City. At a recent party celebrating the fair’s anniversary, this conception was visualized in representations of the fair’s past, conferring a kind of legitimacy to those maintain these forms of representation

and sociality.



Figure 1: Representations of the "old" fair, Museo de la Ciudad, 2013

Labor and Forms of Relative Privilege among Artisans

	Relative level of “Spatial” Privilege	Relative Class Location	General Nature of Work
“Original Vendors” (those with permits)	Highest	Highest	“Hobby” with other sources of income
Middle levels of tenure and strong social networks	Middle	Middle	Primary source of income
Shortest tenure, lowest level of valuable networks	Lowest	Lowest	Secondary source of income

Lo Popular: Appeals at the Margins

Not all sectors have benefited equally from reinvestment. On a gray chilly day in August, I approach the former Padelai orphanage, an imposing stone building that has been occupied by dozens of families since the 1980s. But in 2003, 128 families were evicted from the building with the city government citing structural problems and the risk of collapse. The site was later slated to become a Spanish cultural center. The city subsidized the project by providing the Spanish government with a 30-year rent-free lease in exchange for the building’s upgrade. But Spain’s economic crisis left the building in disuse and informal occupants reappeared in early 2012.

As I approach the building I notice a police car parked out front. The car belongs to the city’s Metropolitan Police. I am told by the police not to enter the building. A court case will decide the fate of those living in the building and in the meantime no new inhabitants are to enter. I enter through a back gate, encouraged by Diego a man in his early 50s who seems unconcerned by the police out front. Diego has lived in the San Telmo neighborhood off and on for some 30 years. Like many of the occupants of the Padelai he moved to Buenos Aires in the early 1980s from the impoverished northern province of Jujuy. In the late 1980s, Diego and

fellow residents petitioned the city government to be incorporated as a cooperative and to gain legal possession of the complex. Architectural renders were created, funding was secured by the city, and hopes were high among the *cooperativistas*. But hyperinflation and economic crisis, a change in city policy, and increased land values from the redevelopment of the nearby waterfront scuttled plans for funding.



Figure 2: The Padelai, calle Balcarce

The conflict over the Padelai illustrates how novel configurations of culture geared toward international tourism have produced new tensions around who is the city's legitimate public. Diego believes the Padelai to be an

important historical site in the

neighborhood, recalling with ease the 19th century date of its foundation. We descend a dark stairwell, through a bedroom with a couple sleeping to find a centennial underground passage that years ago led to a local hospital across the street. Connecting the contemporary sense of marginalization felt by the *cooperativistas*, Diego casts the use of the underground tunnel as a form of keeping orphaned children invisible from the neighborhood's higher status residents. But this story departs from local tourist narratives catered toward the commodification of the neighborhood's culture for international visitors. For Diego the history of the orphanage as a place for orphaned children of the waves of European immigration that characterized late 19th and early 20th century Argentina meant that the building should be preserved for popular groups

today. In explaining the suspended plans for the cultural center, Diego laments the destruction of the building that occurred as preliminary construction began. Unlike the local state, which strove to frame redevelopment as a preservation policy contributing to the neighborhood's revitalization, Diego cast the use of the building for popular sectors without access to housing as representing an "authentic" history of the building and neighborhood. As Diego leads me around the sprawling complex, he appears close to and respected by the other cooperative members who are making fresh bread in the communal kitchen. Diego is proud of his knowledge of local history and mentions how in the past the neighborhood had "normal" bars and restaurants where you could get something to eat. Today, he laments, one doesn't even know how to sit or order in the restaurants oriented to international visitors.



Figure 3: Renders for the Redeveloped Padelai

While artisans generally present themselves as protecting the interests of the neighborhood's popular sectors, the Sunday street fair provides few opportunities to members of the Padelai cooperative who may lack the connections and forms of cultural capital that can be converted into material advantage. Recently, however, this has changed. While the neighborhood's poorest members may find it difficult to use the district's public space to their advantage, the Padelai cooperative has recently taken to organizing its own festival on Sunday

on its sprawling premises, offering folk music, 10-peso *chori* sandwiches and a number of other homemade foods. Oddly, this festival invokes a rather different set of representations and symbolic forms. Many of those attending are Argentine; politically aware and keen to partake in popular offerings in the neighborhood. The largely porteño crowd on a recent Sunday included, in addition to the tradition *asado*, a band playing music from the provinces.



Figure 4: Neighborhood Advertisement for Sunday Festival at the Padelai

Yet the Padelai represents a special case given its privileged location, relatively safe for the moment from harassment by the authorities. With the *patio provinciano*, the inhabitants of the Padelai have been able to insert themselves into certain place-specific capital flows. But not all popular sectors are so lucky.

When I speak with Florencia, a fresh juice vendor operating nearby, it becomes clear that without access to the networks and cultural capital provided by other artisans, street vendors are subject to increased policing and harassment. Florencia mentions that the police on numerous occasions have told her she cannot sell on the street without a food permit. In order to remain there, she has had to appeal to different scales of local politics, aligning herself with vendors from other parts of the city who have petitioned particular sympathetic legislators in the local state to champion their cause. She has not, on the other hand, received support from the artisans who generally network among others on their self-organized blocks. After weeks of waiting she

was able to obtain a document suggesting that her work is a means of subsistence and thus she is exempt from local ordinances against street vending. In this case, the benefits Florencia derives from her ability to claim space in the neighborhood are real but circumscribed by her lack of access to the most privileged networks and certain forms of cultural production. Nonetheless the type of belonging carved out at the margins here is real even if exceedingly precarious.

CONCLUSIONS

Increasing levels of urban reinvestment throughout Latin America existing alongside a significant lack of habitat and housing solutions and mediated by economic restructuring and crisis demonstrates how urban paradigms circulate globally and at times collide with local politics to produce new forms of inequality. While this development has led to important processes of spatial exclusion, as central districts of the city are converted into landscapes of cultural and touristic production, it also provides insights into how divergent groups of actors draw upon key internal resources, appropriate globalizing spaces of the city center, and generate associations with local institutions in order to advance their political and social aims in a city undergoing transformation. This paper seeks to develop a framework for thinking about “culture” as more than simply a set of unequally distributed resources to be tapped in the global economy. Instead, this so-called tool kit might be seen as generative – creatively manipulated by various social collectivities, with more or sometimes less successful results. If indeed they engage on a deeply unequal playing field, these creative manipulations nonetheless contribute to the complex symbolic and material reconfiguration of this site.

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