

Concrete Dreams: Practice, value and built environments in post-crisis Buenos Aires

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With a promising title that brings together urban futures, material presents and economic crises, *Concrete Dreams* is a welcome contribution to the study of contemporary urban transformation in Latin America. Important themes that shape life in cities lie at the centre of this book—from the production of urban space and its privatization to participatory urban planning and environmental activism. Using a sharp ethnographic focus and writing from the intersection of anthropology and architecture, Nicholas D'Avella collects everyday stories about how people interact with buildings, examining the politics of the built environment in Buenos Aires. By narrating a compelling story of urban life and urban struggle, so common in many other places, he exposes the tensions, exclusions and inequalities surrounding urban planning and the use of public land.

The book successfully achieves its aim of reflecting on how different practices create different kinds of value in buildings, and in doing so, it shows the value of urban anthropology for understanding everyday interactions between people and the built environment. The analysis also draws on urban studies, architecture, and actor-network theory (ANT) scholarship to show the articulations and connections between materialities—such as bricks, dollars and real estate markets—and the links between past and present, theory and practice, and practices and values. The city is read through five chapters that clearly illustrate that values are not neutral, practices are situated, and buildings are contested. The first chapter looks at stories about real estate development, the second examines how architectural expertise shapes the construction, value and selling of buildings, the third and fourth engage with neighbourhood life, advocacy and activism, and the last one focuses on architectural pedagogy and professional practice.

The book is the result of an enormous effort involving multiple conversations, spaces, actors and connections, from the commercial world of real estate markets to the political struggles over space and the future of neighbourhoods in the midst of rapid urban change. Interweaving deep theoretical reflection with personal experience and critical fieldwork analysis, in chapter 1 D'Avella invites us to think about financial transactions through the eyes of the people whose lives have been affected by the fluctuations of a volatile economy. Finance is then examined as a set of relationships between people and objects. In 'thinking ecologically about investment', the author makes visible the drama of living under high inflation levels and the uncertainty this creates for making life choices. This, in turn, reveals a complex world of parallel currencies and alternative forms of investments. For an Argentinian, reading this book feels like travelling back in time—revisiting the painful past of a society repeatedly hit by hardship, financial struggle, monetary unpredictability and social injustice. But the stories narrated in this book also show society's creative imagination, persistence and resilience when it comes to navigating financial speculation and real estate transactions. The

discussion on the centrality of 'bricks' vividly reflects the financial concerns of a middle-class that has seen the value of its savings collapse, crisis after crisis.

The mystery of how properties are appraised and priced is revealed in chapter 2, which offers a thorough account of the various ways of valuing a building. A concern with ways of knowing is a thread that weaves the chapters of the book together. Those interested in the real estate market, particularly the logic behind buyers' practices and how the market operates in Argentina, will find this chapter fascinating. Combining urban poetry and activism, chapter 3 provides a great insight into the workings of neighbours' associations—their campaigns, petitions and events—connecting seemingly disparate facts, stories and objects about cultural and urban life.

While chapter 4 examines urban planning—from Le Corbusier's sketches during his visit to Buenos Aires to neighbours' attempts to change the existing urban code—chapter 5 critically analyses architectural pedagogy, showing that 'another type of architecture is possible'. Urban contrasts become apparent in this careful analysis of public assemblies, where corruption and private interests interfere with the process of democratic urban planning. A detailed analysis puts into question the role of professional knowledge and expertise in regulating and intervening in the city, while also reconsidering the meaning of participatory democracy in view of the hopes, voices and aspirations of local residents. D'Avella is concerned with the future of architecture and the extent to which hegemonic market values can be contested. His call for sensing the environment and feeling the city is timely, and could have been improved further with a reflection about how the anthropologist's embodied positionality has shaped his ethnographic engagement.

For the Argentine reader who directly experienced the dramatic consequences of the 2001 crises, the context in which this book was written will be familiar territory. However, for those unfamiliar with the history of this country, the book offers a good synthesis and reflection of an important period in Argentina's recent social, economic and political history, which continues to shape the present. In attempting to shed light on the approach adopted and the different levels, frames and scales of analysis, the syntax becomes at times high falutin' and jargon can make the themes seem more esoteric than they actually are. The discussion of economic pasts and how possible, viable and hopeful futures are dealt with in the present could also have been linked to the scholarship on the sociology of time and social theory. Perhaps most interesting to read are the rich descriptions and depictions of the everyday through the stories of ordinary people.

This book will be of interest to anyone—students, neighbours, planners, architects, geographers and other urban researchers—concerned with the ways public space is disappearing in cities and how local residents are organizing themselves to resist and combat the forces of real estate development, bureaucracy and corruption. It offers a fascinating urban ethnography of the present, one which allows us to re-think the value of buildings and how these values are created in everyday life, beyond the material and the economic. It also highlights the epistemological value of the economic crisis for understanding the transformations in people's subjectivities. At a time when Buenos Aires is confronting the growth of high-rise luxury developments and

mega real estate projects, D'Avella offers a glimmer of hope amid the threats to green spaces, heritage and barrio life.

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