Transactions of the Association of European Schools of Planning • 10 (2026)
doi: 10.24306/TrAESOP.2026.01.005

THE OLYMPIC VILLAGE AS A CATALYST FOR URBAN TRANSFORMATION IN THE SOUTH OF BUENOS AIRES

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Abstract

Urban developments resulting from mega-events have generated divergent territorial outcomes, ranging from market-driven restructuring to more integrated forms of urban regeneration. In Buenos Aires, the 2018 Youth Olympic Games led to the development of the Olympic Village in Comuna 8, a historically disadvantaged and fragmented area of the city. This article examines how the Olympic Village was reinterpreted as a catalyst for a broader territorial vision of the city's southern area. Using a qualitative, interpretative, and ex post case-study approach, it analyses planning documents and empirical materials produced during the formulation of strategic visions between 2022 and 2025. The paper defines a catalyst as an intervention that enables the development and scaling of planning frameworks and institutional arrangements, rather than one that directly produces spatial transformation. From this perspective, the Olympic Village functioned as a methodological and institutional pilot case. The findings indicate a partial and conditional success: while the experience contributed to reframing planning approaches, its spatial effects remain limited and dependent on ongoing implementation capacity and metropolitan coordination. The article shows that catalytic interventions in fragmented contexts operate primarily through institutional and methodological transformation rather than immediate territorial change.

Keywords:

Mega-event, urban planning, urban catalyst, transformation, vision.

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1. Introduction

Urban planning for mega-events, including the Olympic Games and Football World Cup, has been conceptualised in various ways. The notion of the 'city of exception' (Friendly, 2020) highlights instances where large-scale projects, such as Rio de Janeiro's Porto Maravilha for the 2016 Olympics, are market-driven and facilitate state-assisted privatisation to advance capital interests. In contrast, Barcelona's 1992 Olympics demonstrated a strong territorial commitment, which utilised Olympic urbanism to revitalise distressed suburbs. The development of new urban spaces in residential areas served as a catalyst for the emergence of new urban centralities (Muñoz, 1997).

In the Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (CABA), efforts to integrate the Olympic Village-Barrio Olimpico (*BO)*, constructed for the 2018 Youth Olympic Games, have been insufficient. Sports facilities have been underutilised, and urban infrastructure remains disconnected from the broader urban context and is rarely accessed despite their scale and significance in addressing climate change challenges (Marconi, Perelman and Salgado, 2022). Fragmented and sporadic interventions have produced limited positive outcomes, such as increased housing through the *BO* legacy and the integration of *Villa 20*, a nearby informal settlement. Enhancing the effectiveness of these initiatives required a reconsideration of conventional approaches, and makes the adoption of a sustainability-oriented model and a renewed vision for the area imperative.

This article examines how the *BO* was subsequently reinterpreted as a catalyst for a broader territorial vision –not because it directly transformed the southern area of the city, but because it functioned as a pilot case through which new diagnostic approaches, institutional arrangements, and spatial strategies could be tested and later scaled up.

In this article, a "catalyst" is understood not as a project that directly produces territorial transformation, but as an intervention that enables the development of diagnostic frameworks, institutional arrangements, and spatial strategies that can subsequently be scaled up. From this perspective, catalytic effects are assessed primarily in methodological and institutional terms, and more cautiously in spatial terms. Rather than assessing the "success" or "failure" of the Olympic Village as an isolated urban project, the paper analyses the processes through which a mega-event intervention originally framed within fragmented planning logics came to support a wider multiscalar strategy for urban transformation.

The article adopts a qualitative, interpretative and ex post case-study approach. The analysis is based on documentary and regulatory review, planning policy analysis, and the examination of empirical materials produced during the formulation of the Vision for the *BO* (2022) as well as the subsequent Vision for the Southern Area of the City (2025)[5]. The production of both visions combined three main components. First, a documentary, cartographic, and statistical review was undertaken which included planning instruments, policy documents, demographic and socio-economic data, land-use patterns, accessibility conditions, infrastructure networks, and environmental constraints. Second, the planning processes incorporated empirical materials generated through fieldwork and stakeholder engagement, including site visits, direct observation, perception surveys, interviews with institutional actors and local stakeholders, and records from participatory processes conducted during the formulation of the visions. Third, these findings informed a projective phase in which spatial scenarios, strategic priorities, and policy proposals were developed through a research-by-design process. These materials are examined retrospectively in this article; no additional interviews, surveys, or fieldwork were undertaken specifically for the purposes of the paper.

Although the vision plans were originally produced through a research-by-design methodology, this article does not seek to present or validate those proposals in normative terms. Instead, it adopts an ex post analytical perspective on that experience, treating the design outputs and empirical materials generated during the planning process as situated sources that make it possible to reconstruct how the Olympic Village was reframed from an isolated legacy project into a broader strategic vision for the south of Buenos Aires.

5 The vision plans analysed here were originally developed through an applied research and research-by-design approach promoted by the Centro de Estudios Económicos Urbanos (CEEU) of the Universidad Nacional de San Martín, in collaboration with public actors, and with contributions from graduate students from Harvard University. In 2022, an interdisciplinary team examined the Olympic Village and its surroundings through a multiscalar and participatory assessment of the territory.

This methodological position also entails limitations. The empirical materials used in the article were not originally produced for academic research purposes, but as part of a planning process oriented toward intervention. Moreover, the planning process analysed was developed within a limited time frame and without a fully institutionalised participatory process. Finally, because the broader vision remains only partially implemented, the article cannot assess long-term outcomes. For this reason, the paper focuses on the conceptual, institutional, and territorial logics through which the vision was constructed, rather than on its definitive impacts, and considers the conditions under which such impacts may emerge. This methodological approach informs Sections 3 and 4 which analyse the empirical materials and reconstruct the planning processes to assess the extent and limits of the catalytic effect.

2. From Public Actions to the Mega-Event

2.1 A Planning History for the Revitalisation of the City's South

Urban planning in the Global South has long used models from the Global North, including technocratic-rational, strategic, and regional forms. These models often fail to fit Latin American cities facing rapid urban growth. They miss issues like widespread informality, deep-rooted inequalities, and unique local socio-economic conditions (Watson, 2009). It is critical to reassess these approaches and shift planning towards local adaptation and inclusivity.

In Buenos Aires City, planners and managers have long repeated a sharp divide between the north and the south. Public and private investors have favoured the north, making it a symbol of a modern, globally integrated city, whilst the south has fallen behind in terms of infrastructure, services and opportunities. These territorial dynamics have remained fragmented and segregated, while also being subject to sporadic interventions (Gorelik, 2013) as well as several urban plans and projects (Figure 1).

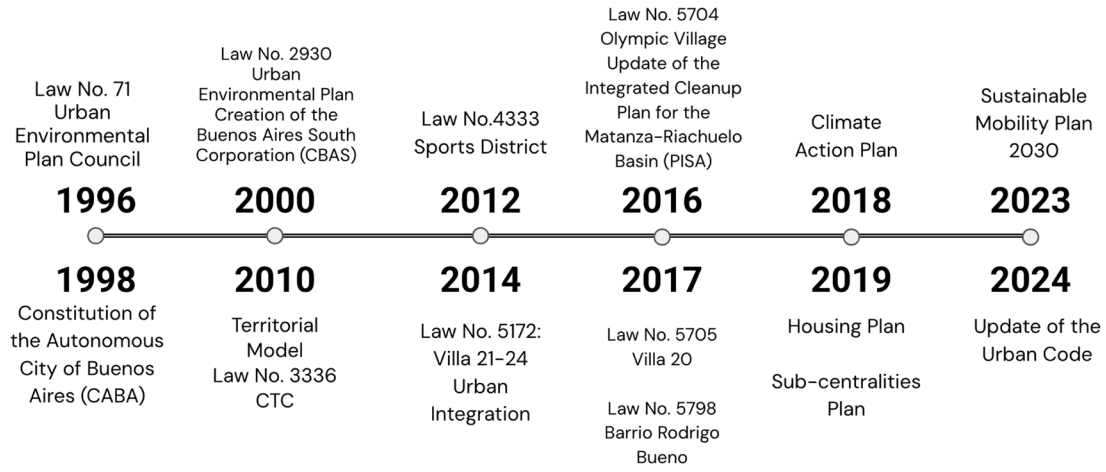

Figure 1: Main projects, plans, and regulations of CABA over the past 30 years, presented in chronological order. Source: Authors.

The city is divided into fifteen communes; administrative units created in 2005 under the city's autonomy framework. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, successive but fragmented and discontinued planning initiatives have shaped the southern area of CABA, particularly *Comuna 8*. These initiatives deepened territorial inequalities (Roitman, 2016).

During the late 20th century, processes of forced displacement, environmental degradation, and informal urbanisation further reinforced fragmentation and inequality in the southern area (Torres, 2001; Zapata, 2013). Over the past three decades, successive administrations responded with a sequence of regulatory and institutional instruments[1]. Each instrument addressed a real problem; none, however, was articulated with the others as part of a sustained territorial strategy.

1 The Urban Environmental Plan Council (Law No. 71/1998), the Corporación Buenos Aires Sur (Law No. 4706/2000), the Urban Environmental Plan (Law No. 2930/2008) and the Territorial Model 2010–2060, more recently complemented by the 'District Laws' and by socio-urban integration programmes such as Villa 20 (Law No. 5705/2016).

Within this context of fragmented and discontinuous planning, the *BO* emerges as a recent intervention with transformative potential. Unlike the preceding instruments of ordinary planning, it was derived from the compressed institutional window that was opened by the mega-event. Its built outputs, housing connected to the surrounding fabric through public spaces and community facilities - with units subsequently allocated to middle-income families through an affordable housing scheme (IVC, 2025) - are the visible expression of a less visible operation: the testing, within a bounded territory and a constrained timeline, of a form of coordination between public, academic, and private actors that decades of fragmented planning had been unable to produce. This accumulated fragmentation is precisely the institutional gap to which the Olympic intervention responded.

2.2 Public Infrastructure for Hosting the Olympic Games

Comuna 8, located in the southern area of CABA, is characterised by the coexistence of low-density residential areas, industrial zones, large-scale social housing complexes, informal settlements, and extensive green spaces. The presence of large infrastructure –such as wide avenues, logistics warehouses, large public parks, and sport venues – poses barriers that hinder its urban potential, either due to its scale or its lack of accessibility. As Watson (2009) noted, sporting events often represent a strategic opportunity to renew infrastructure and foster local economic development through planned urban transformation interventions. This is the case of *BO* in *Comuna 8*.

Following a competitive selection process in which Buenos Aires competed with Medellín and Glasgow, the city was announced as the winner in July 2013. Several regulatory and economic measures were implemented to provide context for the designation. The first of these, in 2014, was the creation of the Sports District through Law No. 5235, which was designed to encourage economic development by granting tax benefits to companies related to the sports sector. The initiative aimed to attract manufacturers of sporting goods, service providers specialising in sports, and builders and developers. To enable this, infrastructure investment was a fundamental requirement, with key interventions including the *Metrobus Sur*, which was intended to improve transport connectivity with the *Constitución* Transfer Hub and benefit 250,000 people, the Dellepiane Bus Terminal, and the *Centro de Transferencia de Cargas* (CTC by its Spanish acronym, Cargo Transfer Centre) (Carmona, 2017) (Figure 2).

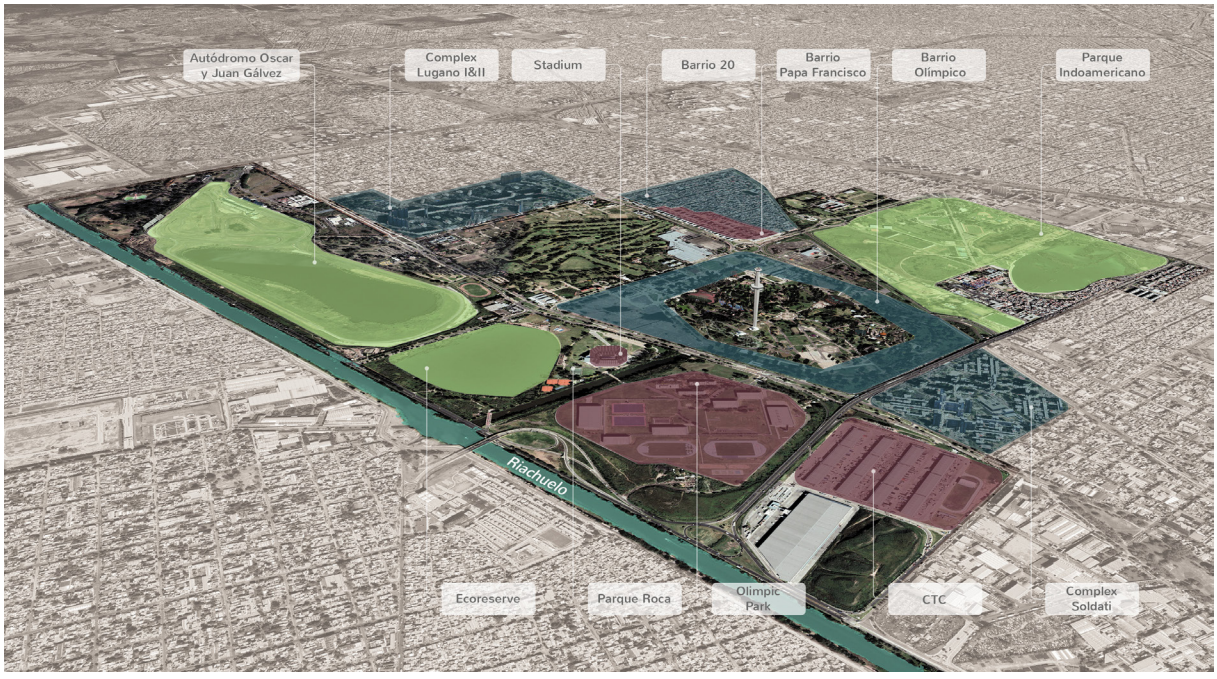

Figure 2: View of the surroundings of Olympic Village in *Comuna 8*, showing major facilities with diversity of uses and barrier effects. From left to right, "Oscar and Julián Álvarez" racetrack, Lugano I and II housing complexes, Lake Lugano Ecological Reserve, Mary Terán de Weiss stadium, Parque Roca, Barrio 20 (informal settlement), Barrio Papa Francisco (social housing), *Barrio Olímpico* next to Parque de la Ciudad, Parque Indoamericano (public space), CTC logistics and freight infrastructure, and Riachuelo river in the lower front. Source: CEEU (2023)

In view of this opportunity, the Government of CABA coordinated efforts across various governmental departments, the private sector, and local stakeholders to develop new infrastructure that was intended to generate lasting territorial impacts. When analysing investment processes in other mega-event host cities (Zhang and Wu, 2008), the basic needs for Olympic infrastructure were seen to be defined around certain common facilities: sports venues, athlete accommodation, transport improvements, and upgrades to surrounding urban environments.

Subsequently, in 2016, Law No. 5704 was passed. This authorised the urbanisation of 100 hectares of the *Parque de la Ciudad* and 51 hectares of *Villa Soldati*, with funds allocated to improve infrastructure in the *Comuna 8* - including the socio-urban integration process of *Villa 20*. In the same year, the *Puente Olímpico Ribera Sur* (Olympic Bridge) was constructed over the Riachuelo River, connecting CABA with the municipality of Lanús in the Buenos Aires Province. This road crossing is suitable for light vehicles, passenger transport, and heavy traffic, and also includes pedestrian walkways as well as a cycle lane. The main objective of its construction was to improve connectivity between the city and surrounding municipalities, and through doing so it also contributed to the creation of a new urban centrality (GCBA, 2025a).

With regard to the Olympic Games themselves, specific facilities were created, including a high-performance sports complex, an Olympic and diving pool, a tennis stadium, five subdividable pavilions, and two athletics tracks (GCBA, 2025b). To accommodate the athletes, a competition was held to design twenty-nine nine-storey buildings grouped into five blocks, providing 1,370 residential units (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Collective housing buildings in the Olympic Village, characterized by medium density and a perimeter block configuration that integrates green spaces and active ground-floor uses, supporting urban continuity and community life. infrastructure. Source: Buenos Aires City Government, 2019.

3. The Olympic Legacy

3.1 Socio-Economic Context of Comuna 8

Before analysing the externalities produced by Olympic infrastructure, it is necessary to understand the socio-economic context in which these interventions were situated. The historical lack of a cohesive urban strategy for the area, combined with fragmented and poorly coordinated interventions, has produced persistent territorial inequalities. The territory comprising *Comuna 8* has historically been the most disadvantaged area of CABA in terms of urban development (Cortés and Elinbaum, 2019).

This structural disadvantage was reflected across virtually every indicator of urban development, housing quality and access to services, positioning *Comuna 8* consistently below the citywide average (INDEC, 2024; Carmona, 2017). A second defining feature was the territory's structural fragmentation: approximately 43% of *Comuna 8*'s surface was affected by urban barriers, large-scale infrastructure, transport corridors, industrial facilities and discontinuous open spaces, that fragmented internal connectivity and isolated the area from the rest of the city (CEEU, 2023).

A third feature, more recent but analytically central, is the persistence of 205 vacant plots in the immediate surroundings of the Olympic perimeter, seven years after its completion. These plots are the empirical signature that the housing project alone did not generate the urban dynamics it was expected to trigger. Together, these three conditions, structural disadvantage, urban fragmentation and vacant land in the post-Olympic perimeter, define the problem which the Olympic experience sought to respond to; not to be another instrument added to the series, but to be a catalytic device that would articulate what previous interventions had left disconnected.

3.2 Tools for Accessing Affordable Housing

The planning actions deployed for the Youth Olympic Games were framed within a set of instruments which sought to facilitate access to housing through the residential units originally built to accommodate athletes. These instruments, not the buildings themselves, constitute the housing dimension of the Olympic device.

The *BO* project was framed under City Law No. 6137, the Affordable Housing Plan, which targets middle-income families that are able to allocate up to 30% of their income to housing. The *Instituto de Vivienda de la Ciudad* (IVC) launched the *BO* programme to allocate the units, with a distribution scheme designed to encourage local rooting: 50% for residents of *Comuna 8* with over five years of residence (with priority extended to other southern communes if the threshold was not met), 10% each for teachers and police officers employed by the City Government, and 30% for the broader CABA area (IVC, 2025)[2]. Taken together, Law 6137, the IVC programme and the UVA instrument constitute a single operational architecture: a housing device specifically configured for the post-Olympic transition.

The Olympic device did not, however, operate in isolation. Adjacent to the Olympic perimeter, and within the same administrative window, the socio-urban integration of *Villa 20* was advanced under Law No. 5705 (2016) (Figure 4). The *Mesa de Gestión Participativa* established in 2016 anchored a process-oriented methodology; what Motta and Almansi (2017) describe as a "project-process": a project logic in which the project evolves as the process advances, and a procedural logic in which the process is redefined as the project takes shape. This effort gave rise to the *Proyecto Integral de Reurbanización* (PIRU) and to the *Barrio Papa Francisco* public housing complex of 904 units which is located on a plot adjacent to the Olympic Village.

2 Access operated through Unidades de Valor Adquisitivo (UVA) mortgage loans, an indexation mechanism created by the Central Bank of Argentina in 2016, adjusted daily through the Reference Stabilisation Coefficient to preserve the real value of capital over time (Observatorio Económico Social, 2018).

Figure 4: View of *Villa 20 (bottom)*, social housing in *Barrio Papa Francisco (lower middle), a large grocery store (upper middle) surrounded by a private Golf Club (green area), Barrio Olimpico buildings and the roof-top of Mary Terán stadium (upper left side)*. The image illustrates housing and urban quality differences between the informal settlement, the social housing development and surrounding infrastructure. Source: Matias Beccar Varela Arquitectos Asociados, 2024.

Villa 20 was not catalysed by the Olympic experience. Rather, it followed an autonomous trajectory which was anchored in pre-existing community organising and a regulatory framework that was distinct from Law 6137. Its analytical relevance lies elsewhere: in its simultaneity. The coexistence of two contemporaneous housing operations on adjacent plots, one targeted at middle-income families through market-indexed mortgages, the other at residents of an informal settlement through participatory reurbanisation, made it possible, for the first time, to think of the south of the city as a system rather than as a juxtaposition of disconnected interventions. *Villa 20* is, in this sense, the boundary condition without which the catalytic reading of the Olympic Village would lack territorial scaffolding.

3.3 Assessment of the Impacts of the Olympic Project in Comuna 8

The interventions implemented in the context of the Youth Olympic Games generated both positive and negative externalities, and revealed pre-existing tensions and limitations within traditional approaches to urban planning rather than constituting a direct causal challenge to them.

According to a report produced by the Civil Association for Equality and Justice (ACIJ, 2023), the construction of 1,665 new housing units in *Barrio Papa Francisco* has provided permanent housing solutions for 18 percent of the neighbourhood's families. 99 percent of surveyed residents stated that the construction of new housing and housing improvements were necessary interventions. Among respondents who were allocated new housing units, 70 percent reported an improvement in housing quality following their relocation. At the same time, the proportion of families relying on informal connections to public utility networks decreased by more than 60 percent (ACIJ, 2023). With regard to the specifics of the *BO* accommodation units, 30 buildings comprising 1,159 housing units were developed and are currently occupied through UVA mortgage loans. It should be noted from an urban development perspective, however, that seven years after completion 205 plots remain available for development. This stagnation in market dynamics suggests that these plots are not attractive for commercialisation, partly due to the characteristics of the immediate surrounding environment.

While the housing projects promoted in the *BO* and in *Barrio 20–Papa Francisco* can be considered successful in facilitating access to affordable housing for low- and middle-income social groups, they were not accompanied by a comprehensive reassessment of the surrounding urban environment (CEEU, 2023). This omission has had direct consequences for the quality of life of both long-standing residents and new inhabitants. The physical context includes factors such as environmental legacies, transport infrastructure, access to public green spaces, and long-established land uses. To examine these issues in greater detail, perception surveys were conducted among residents of the *BO* and users of the surrounding public spaces. The questionnaires covered a broad range of topics related to everyday life in the neighbourhood, and sought to capture perspectives from the local community (CEEU, 2023).

Among the issues raised by residents, environmental legacies emerged as the first concern. The area currently occupied by the *BO* originated as a municipal landfill in the late 1940s, generating negative externalities for the surrounding territory. The closure of the landfill during the last civic–military dictatorship (1976-1983) led to the planning of large semi-public green spaces in its place, such as *Parque Roca* and *Parque de la Ciudad*. This legacy has been compounded by the mixed residential–industrial profile that characterises much of *Comuna 8,* and entails specific requirements related to freight transport. As a logistics-oriented area, it exhibits deficiencies in the number and routes of bus lines, which negatively affects its connectivity with the rest of the city. In addition, shortcomings in the design of bus stops and shelters discourage the use of public transport. The Premetro light rail service has also not undergone any substantive improvement in terms of service provision and frequency; it is widely perceived not only as unreliable and, at times, unsafe. Public space likewise requires substantial revision, particularly with respect to walkability. A lack of pedestrian-oriented design in streets and sidewalks is evident, and makes even short-distance trips difficult. Accessibility barriers are also present for people with disabilities and for users of all ages and physical conditions because of the absence of accessible crossings, adequate minimum widths, and tactile and auditory elements. These shortcomings are especially pronounced along Avenues Fernández de la Cruz, Escalada (the immediate urban surroundings of *Villa 20* and *Barrio Papa Francisco*), and Roca (CEEU, 2023). As a result of deficient connectivity and limited access to public transport, the use of private vehicles is essential for residents.

Residential developments have also failed to adequately account for the increases in car ownership and parking demands that generated by the new housing stock. This has resulted in a high occupation of public space by parked vehicles. The streets of the *BO* were not designed for this sort of demand and it has led to an undermining of the quality of the urban environment. Large-scale public transport options, as well as active mobility infrastructure such as cycling lanes, also remain incomplete and there is also a lack of transfer hubs that would facilitate intermodality.

Regarding land uses, the area has not been subject to systematic evaluation processes or adjustment strategies throughout the presentation of plans and programmes that would guide it towards a configuration compatible with emerging residential dynamics and mixed-use development. Residents have expressed the need for neighbourhood-scale commercial services for the purchase of everyday goods (CEEU, 2023). At present, there is a noticeable scarcity of accessible local retail options, either due to low occupancy rates or high prices. At the same time, large-scale infrastructure such as the sports complex in *Parque Roca* and the tower[3] in *Parque de la Ciudad* remain underutilised. Although the sports complex is of metropolitan scale, neither it nor the *Parque de la Ciudad* are currently open to the public.

Finally, despite the abundance of green spaces in the area, their management is fragmented across multiple jurisdictions and agencies, hindering the consolidation of a coordinated and effective governance framework for this socio-environmental resource (CEEU, 2023). Although *Comuna 8* has the highest amount of green space per capita in the city, access to its 285 hectares of publicly owned green areas remains limited for a large proportion of residents. These parks are largely underutilised; difficult to access due to physical, regulatory and safety barriers; and lack unified management and programming oriented towards community needs (CEEU, 2023).

3 The tower in the Parque de la Ciudad (Villa Soldati, Buenos Aires) is officially known as the Torre Espacial (Space Tower). Manufactured in Austria in 1980, it stands as the tallest structure in Argentina and features a 360-degree observation deck offering unparalleled views of the city. It is considered one of the most iconic landmarks of the southern area of CABA.

The challenges identified through the diagnosis of *Comuna 8*, together with the limited impacts of Olympic infrastructure, reveal a territory that continues to face significant socio-economic disadvantages, particularly in terms of employment and poverty, as well as challenges related to urban barriers and access to urban resources. Nevertheless, the presence of substantial underutilised areas, as well as the area's existing infrastructure, strategically designated districts (such as the Sports District), and the urbanisation of *Villa 20* (later renamed *Barrio 20–Papa Francisco*) constitute key opportunities for future development and urban integration (Arqueros, and González Redondo, 2017). In addition, the availability of 205 vacant plots represents a concrete opportunity to promote new urban developments aligned with the needs of current and future residents.

These conditions help explain why the Olympic Village was subsequently reframed not only as a housing legacy, but also as a potential entry point for a broader territorial strategy in the south of the city.

4. A Vision for the South of the City

4.1 Scope, Status, and Analytical Standpoint of the Scheme

This section examines a set of strategic visions and guidelines developed between 2022 and 2024 for the *Barrio Olimpico* and, subsequently, for the southern area of CABA. These schemes neither constituted a statutory urban plan in the strict sense, nor corresponded to a single document formally approved by the city government. Rather, they emerged from processes of applied planning and strategic reflection promoted by local public actors, and also benefitted from the participation of academic institutions and contributions from other relevant stakeholders.

In particular, the so-called *Vision for the BO* (2022) was developed through a planning process which lasted approximately eight months, and combined technical analysis, background review, surveys, interviews, and spaces for exchange with local actors. The authors of this article, acting from a technical-academic position, participated in this process through a technical assistance programme provided to *Corporación Buenos Aires Sur*, a public development corporation established in 2000. Their contribution focused on territorial diagnosis, information systematisation, and the formulation of strategic guidelines for the southern part of the city. Subsequently, some of the lessons derived from this experience informed a broader Vision for the Southern Area of the City (2025), which was promoted by the local government towards a wider territorial scale (CEEU, 2025).

The analysis that follows adopts a critical ex post perspective on these schemes. Subsections 4.2 to 4.4 primarily employ a descriptive and analytical register, that seeks to reconstruct the content of the visions, their multi-scalar logic, spatial mechanisms, and intervention guidelines. Subsection 4.5 develops a critical assessment that identifies strengths, limitations, and conditions for implementation, as well as introducing analytical distance from the documents and processes under review. This framing seeks to avoid a normative reading of the text, and instead positions it as an academic reflection on an experience of applied planning.

4.2 A New Multiscale and Sustainable Vision for Bo

The *Vision for the BO* (2022) was conceived as a strategic framework that would capitalise on the infrastructure legacy of the mega-event while addressing persistent urban deficits in its immediate surroundings; deficits aggravated and made more visible by the pandemic. This vision was neither a statutory urban plan nor a closed set of projects. Instead, it operated as a conceptual structure that organised priorities, intervention sequences, and scales of action. Its objective was to move beyond the logic of fragmented and episodic interventions that have historically characterised the southern part of the city, and establish a pathway of sustained actions over the medium and long term.

From an analytical standpoint, the vision was structured around three core components. First, it adopted an articulated planning approach that combined the actions of local public actors with contributions from academia, the private sector (including urban developers, builders, and local retailers), as well as organisations

and residents from the area. Within this framework, citizen participation, through surveys, interviews, and experiences of community organisation, played a relevant role as a mechanism for producing territorially grounded knowledge and for making everyday issues visible. However, these participatory instances were not conceived as binding decision-making mechanisms. Instead, they functioned primarily as inputs for diagnosis, legitimacy, and the prioritisation of interventions (Campos-Sánchez, Abarca-Álvarez, and Domínguez, 2018).

Second, the vision was organised as a roadmap that distinguished between different levels of definition. The pillars articulated long-term guiding principles; the themes delineated strategic fields of intervention; and the concrete projects translated these guidelines into actions situated in both territory and time. This structure was intended to facilitate temporal sequencing, adaptation to changing contexts, and the progressive accumulation of impacts, while avoiding the assumption that complex structural problems could be resolved simultaneously.

Finally, the vision did not seek merely to maximise the use of what had already been built, but rather to activate the potential of the neighbourhood and its surroundings as an emerging centrality in the southern part of the city. To this end, it adopted a multiscalar approach (Figure 5), understood as the simultaneous consideration of the geographical and governance scales relevant to urban planning (Campos-Sánchez, Abarca-Álvarez, and Domínguez, 2018).

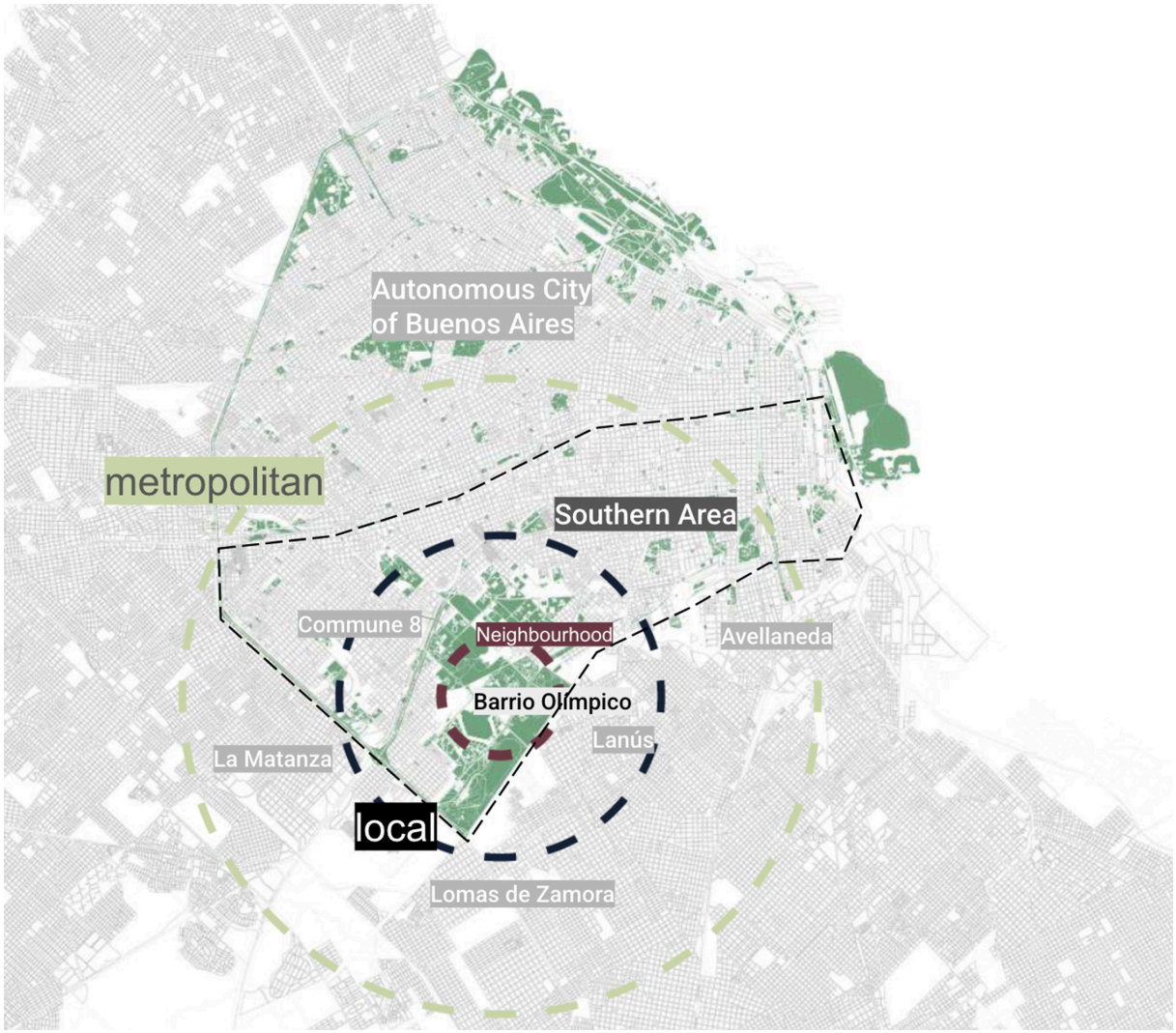

Figure 5: Multiscale Urban Vision Map. Source: CEEU (2023).

At the neighbourhood scale, the vision prioritised the consolidation of the *BO* as a "complete neighbourhood", and sought to improve access to green and public spaces; ensure transport provision and connectivity; promote leisure and community-oriented activities; enable proximity-based retail; and secure close access to healthcare and educational services. This approach sought to ensure that most daily needs could be met on foot or by bicycle, in line with the principle of proximity. Community sustainability, in this sense, derives not only from material urban conditions but also from social interaction, local collective institutions, trust, safety, and a positive identification with place (Dempsey *et al.* 2011).

At the commune scale, the vision sought to reinforce territorial identity by valuing the social, cultural, environmental, and economic assets of *Comuna 8*. It acknowledged the need to articulate the neighbourhood with broader centralities, facilities, and territorial dynamics, particularly those associated with *Villa Soldati* and *Villa Lugano*.

At the metropolitan scale, the vision assumed that several of the area's structuring conditions, such as everyday mobility, access to employment, and socio-environmental barriers, extend beyond the administrative boundaries of the city; thereby anticipating the need for interjurisdictional coordination mechanisms. *Comuna 8* borders four municipalities in the Province of Buenos Aires (Lomas de Zamora, Lanús, Avellaneda and La Matanza) and is located along a historical edge shaped by the Riachuelo River and its associated environmental liabilities. In this context, the vision articulated the aspiration to transform the *BO* into a metropolitan centrality "at a human scale", and thus sought to leverage the area's ecodiverse character, preserve neighbourhood identities, and promote more inclusive forms of economic development whilst reducing the gap between the southern part of the city and the citywide average.

Taken together, these scales provided an orienting framework for public action. Their effectiveness depended on its translation into operational instruments, institutional arrangements, and management capacities; all critically examined in the following sections.

4.3 Formulation Process and Participation: Contributions, Scope, and Limitations

The *Vision for the BO* was structured around five pillars, conceived to respond to the needs and challenges of the neighbourhood and its immediate surroundings, with territorial cohesion being the central premise. In this paper, cohesion is understood as the reduction of spatial inequalities in access to services, facilities, and urban opportunities, operationalised through accessibility criteria (Dempsey *et al.* 2011). These pillars emerged from an eight-month collaborative planning process that combined quantitative and qualitative analyses, a background review, and inputs from various key stakeholders.

To understand the role played by participatory inputs in the design of the vision, including surveys, interviews, and experiences such as *Mesa Activa*, it is necessary to clarify their functions within the process. Surveys and interviews made it possible to identify everyday problems, perceptions of safety and mobility, barriers to facilities, and intervention priorities from the perspective of residents and users. In parallel, experiences of community organisations such as *Mesa Activa* contributed to the production of local knowledge about urban projects and helped make visible territorially grounded demands that do not always emerge through formal technical instances.

Taken together, these instruments operated primarily as tools for diagnosis and prioritisation, and provided relevant information for the construction of the strategic vision as well as the strengthening of its social legitimacy. However, their translation into binding decisions and stable co-implementation mechanisms was heterogeneous, varying across thematic axes and project types. In most cases, participation was not institutionalised as a permanent governance arrangement but rather remained limited to the formulation stage of the process.

This clarification is central to enabling maintenance of an analytical distance from the process under examination. Participation is not assumed here as an "automatic" attribute nor as a guarantee of outcomes, but rather as a component with concrete scope and verifiable limits; shaped by institutional frameworks, management capacities, and pre-existing power relations. In turn, acknowledging these limits enabled a more rigorous assessment of both the potential and the tensions inherent in participatory approaches to applied urban planning.

4.4 The Scheme for the Southern Area of the City: Scale Expansion and Spatial Mechanisms

The formulation process of the Vision for the *BO* highlighted a recurrent finding: many of the issues addressed, such as urban barriers, connectivity deficits, functional fragmentation, and limited access to opportunities, exceeded the boundaries of the neighbourhood scale. Materials generated through the planning process, including interviews and surveys, pointed to the need for a broader territorial scope and an adaptive approach that was capable of engaging with the heterogeneous realities of the immediate surroundings as well as the dynamics operating at urban and metropolitan scales.

This diagnosis prompted a strategic expansion of the approach. Rather than consolidating as a standalone project, the *BO* was integrated as a reference point within a larger-scale vision. As a result, its role was, in this sense, defined less by direct territorial effects than by its condition as a methodological and institutional pilot case, through which diagnostic approaches, actor articulation, and project structuring methods were tested and subsequently used to inform a broader strategy. The catalytic effect lay in the transfer and scaling of these frameworks rather than in the immediate spatial transformation.

Following the 2022 vision plan, the development of a Vision for the Southern Area of the City was promoted with the involvement of public sector actors and academic institutions. The vision seeks to foster more balanced territorial development, stronger metropolitan connectivity and improved conditions for quality of life, within a long-term sustainability framework (CEEU, 2025). Its strategic guidelines build upon and expand the pillars developed for the *BO*, and seek to organise intervention across three integrative urban sectors: Southwest, South-Central and Southeast; each address a distinct territorial logic. The Southwest Sector reconfigures a territory of large, fragmented projects into an urbanism of proximity; the South-Central Sector consolidates the southern area as an articulating node within a more integrated metropolis; and the Southeast Sector reconverts fragmented and isolated ecosystems into an articulated network of mixed-use labour markets (CEEU, 2025). The three sectors are unified by the multiscalar logic and the project-process roadmap originally developed in the *BO*. This is the same device, now operating at a territorial scale roughly five times larger.

The scheme also incorporates a multisectoral governance approach which recognises the role of the private sector in terms of capital, innovation, and operational capacity, as well as the contribution of the academic sector to the production of informed, evidence-based planning. In addition, it introduces the principle of temporal continuity: while the vision operates with a long-term strategic horizon, certain interventions take the form of targeted projects that have been designed for specific areas within this broader framework. An example of the same includes the Sáenz–Parque Patricios Walkability Axis (CEEU, 2025). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this articulation between temporal horizons depends on the capacity of the city government to translate these guidelines into operational instruments and stable institutional agreements, an issue that is critically examined in the following section.

4.5 Critical Assessment of the Scheme: Contributions, Risks, and Conditions of Feasibility

Compared to earlier approaches that were characterised by fragmented interventions, weak intersectoral coordination, and limited temporal continuity, the scheme introduces several relevant contributions. Notably, it proposes a multiscalar architecture that links neighbourhood-level proximity, urban connectivity, and metropolitan relationships, while explicitly acknowledging territorial heterogeneity as a starting point. The organisation into complementary sectors avoids homogeneous responses to diverse challenges, and the definition of a roadmap combining long-term strategic objectives with short-term projects suggests an intention to sequence interventions and enable the cumulative build-up of impacts over time.

These strengths, however, coexist with significant implementation risks. There remains a clear imbalance between the ambition of the scheme's principles, particularly those related to integration, coordination, and sustainability, and the degree of development of the operational mechanisms required to make them effective. Issues such as institutional responsibilities, financing instruments, management capacities, and coordination across government levels remain insufficiently specified. In a territorially fragmented context with overlapping jurisdictions (Pírez, 2005), implementation is not a secondary concern but a central condition of feasibility and one of the scheme's main vulnerabilities.

Regarding participation, the process incorporates consultation mechanisms and forms of local knowledge production, such as surveys, interviews, and community-based experiences, that informed diagnosis and prioritisation (CEEU, 2025). Nevertheless, a key challenge lies in translating these inputs into verifiable decisions and sustained co-implementation arrangements. From a critical perspective, participation contributes to legitimacy, but its effectiveness depends on institutionalisation through clear rules, continuity, traceability of contributions, and accountability mechanisms. Where these are weak or absent, the transformative potential of participation is limited.

The notion of the *BO* as a "catalyst" also requires clarification. In this analysis, its catalytic role is understood primarily in methodological and institutional terms. The *BO* functioned as a pilot case through which diagnostic approaches, actor coordination, and a portfolio of projects were tested, with lessons subsequently scaled up to the wider southern area (CEEU, 2025). Spatially, its role is, however, more constrained. Its catalytic effectiveness lies precisely in not directly structuring the territory, but in having enabled the development of the frameworks, instruments, and coordination mechanisms through which broader territorial structuring can occur. While a counterfactual assessment remains limited, the absence of such a coordinated intervention would likely have reinforced existing patterns of fragmentation.

Finally, given *Comuna 8's* location along the boundary with Lomas de Zamora, Lanús, and La Matanza, the scheme's effectiveness also depends on how metropolitan dynamics, such as daily mobility, access to employment, consumption circuits, and urban continuity, are addressed. Without interjurisdictional instruments or stable coordination agreements (Pírez, 2005), there is a risk that metropolitan integration will remain as solely a guiding principle rather than an operational mechanism. Recognising this dimension does not dilute the focus on the southern area of Buenos Aires but rather acknowledges that many of its territorial dynamics are shaped in relation to adjacent municipalities and the Matanza–Riachuelo basin as a shared socio-environmental structure.

In sum, the scheme for the whole southern area articulates a plausible hypothesis for territorial transformation, grounded in a multiscalar design and a nuanced reading of territorial heterogeneity. At the same time, it faces critical challenges related to implementation, the institutionalisation of participation, and metropolitan coordination. Making these tensions explicit is a necessary condition for assessing the scheme's viability and long-term scope. In this sense, the case demonstrates both the capacity to reframe territorial planning approaches as well as the limits of translating strategic visions into sustained material outcomes.

5. Conclusion

Urban planning in CABA, and particularly in its southern area, has historically produced limited structural impacts, largely due to fragmented implementation, episodic interventions, and weak temporal continuity. The infrastructure developed for the 2018 Youth Olympic Games largely reproduced this pattern: while it generated both positive and negative externalities, its impacts have been uneven. Despite the provision of affordable, good-quality housing, the Olympic Village continues to face significant deficits in access to urban amenities, proximity-based services, and articulation with metropolitan centralities and opportunities. In this context, the Vision for the *BO* represents an effort to reorient mega-event-related investments and address persistent inequalities through a more integrated and multiscalar approach, while also providing an opportunity to critically reassess the Olympic experience within broader debates on the 'city of exception' (Friendly, 2020). In this sense, the case can be understood as a partial and conditional success, in which methodological and institutional advances coexist with limited territorial transformation.

From the perspective developed in this article, the *BO* functioned as a "catalyst" primarily in methodological and institutional terms. Rather than operating as a single structuring centre for the southern area of Buenos Aires city, it served as a pilot case through which diagnostic frameworks, planning instruments, and modes of actor articulation were tested and later scaled up within the Vision for the Southern Area. However, the feasibility of this agenda depends less on the quality of strategic design than on its translation into sustained public action. Clear institutional arrangements, operational instruments, metropolitan coordination mechanisms, and the institutionalisation of participation are essential to avoid reproducing the historical gap between integrative principles and implementation capacity. Making these conditions explicit does not weaken the

article's argument; rather, it strengthens its contribution to debates on urban planning, mega-event legacies, and territorial transformation in complex metropolitan contexts.

The analysis shows that catalytic interventions in fragmented metropolitan contexts operate less through immediate spatial effects than through the generation and scaling of planning frameworks, institutional arrangements, and coordination mechanisms.

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