https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2022.10

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Resisting the neo-liberal neighbourhood's straitjacket: relational neighbourhood geographies in Chile and Spain

This article proposes a critical and complex reading of the configuration and reconfiguration of the neighbourhood (*barrio*) based on a comparative analysis of two case studies in Spain and Chile. Neighbourhood life is assumed to be organised around complex, open and dynamic relationships articulated in different relational geographies and not limited to a restricted space–time frame. We propose the concept of 'relational neighbourhood geographies', understanding it as an expansive and malleable socio-spatial field. In both case studies we observe that relational neighbourhood geographies exist beyond the limits of geographically narrow territories and can be expanded by constructing new geographies and territorialities. Consequently, the configuration of the neighbourhood is relationally conditioned by the forms and dynamics that weak and strong ties adopt in given spaces and times. The historical analysis of our case studies shows ways in which relationality is context-sensitive and how bottom-up resistance produces relationality. Although the importance of the relational is observed in both cases, their characterisation, intensity and complexity are different, which creates distinct capacities to produce territorialities and engage and impact city politics.

Keywords: relational neighbourhood geographies, urban community, social networks, Talca (Chile), Barcelona (Spain)

Introduction

The neighbourhood, or *barrio* in Spanish, as a lived space, is a place for daily encounters, for relationships of mutual aid as well as conflict, for refuge and resistance, and for control. However, the complexity and diversity of the neighbourhood space have been reduced in the public imaginary and planning sphere through what Lefebvre called neighbourhood ideology (Lefebvre, 2013). The neighbourhood is, hence, frequently conceived as a delimited and static space that fragments a city, managed as a composite of separated parts. This common ideological use of the neighbourhood

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notion takes as implicit reference a neo-ecological conception that originated in the Chicago School of Human Ecology in the first decades of the twentieth century (Park et al., 1925). This approach has been the pillar for urban planning in the United States and Europe for at least forty years.

The Chicago school's neighbourhood notion has always been present in urban studies, but it was also widely adopted in the 1980s by various governments of North America, Latin America and Europe as part of their neo-liberal urban agenda and its rescaling policies (Brenner, 2004; Madden, 2014). Such policies were designed to cope with the effects of growing inequalities and urban violence produced by the aggressive processes of 'creative destruction' (Harvey, 2006) and massive financialisation of the built environment (Rolnik, 2013). Placing the neighbourhood at the centre of urban policies served a double purpose: first, it pointed to the community as responsible for solving their problems (Harvey, 1997), and second, it confined the problems in limited spaces and looked for solutions in the very place where they were assumed to be produced (Harvey, 1997; Tapia, 2018). This strategy made the neighbourhood the privileged place to test urban policies (Martin, 2003; Silver, 1985; Wellman and Leighton, 1979; Colomb, 2007), to promote 'urban regeneration', and to encourage processes of inclusion and social cohesion (Atkinson et al., 2009).

The primacy of the neighbourhood scale in urban policies monopolises understandings of neighbourhood geographies, relations and scopes of actions. It delimits and separates neighbourhoods from the urban totality. It conditions their existence on affective cohesive bonds, adapting them to official urban programmes. As a result, it has restricted their geographies and territorialities, limiting their capacity to participate in the production of the urban (Letelier, 2018; Tapia, 2018).

Historically, neighbourhoods and their organisation – in Spain, Chile and many other contexts – have played important roles in processes of social mobilisation and response to authoritarian policies. However, the neo-ecological conception of neighbourhoods contributed to their depoliticisation (they stopped engaging the public and the city) and their action was contained within their neighbourhood limits (it stopped being articulated at other scales). Relying on theories that understand neighbourhood life as a sphere of relationships within a framework of coexistence (Keller, 1979; Massey, 2012), not space–time-restricted, and organised around complex, open and dynamic relationships articulated in different relational geographies (Massey, 2012; Merrifield, 2011), this article offers a critical, rich reading of the configuration and reconfiguration of a 'relational neighbourhood geography'. Through it, we transcend the essentialisation of the neighbourhood as a geographical object to highlight its dimension as an expansive and malleable socio-spatial field. From this conceptualisation, we offer a historical analysis of two case studies in Spain and Chile. By doing this, we show ways in which relationality is context-sensitive and how bottom-up resistance produces relationality. In both cases, relational neighbourhoods exist beyond the

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limits of a geographically narrow territory and can be scaled up to the district and the city (and beyond), building new geographies and territorialities (Haesbaert, 2013).

The neighbourhood as relational space

Under the neo-ecological conception of the neighbourhood (Park et al., 1925) and its practical application as 'neighbourhood unit' (Perry, 1974), urban entities were constructed from notions of ecological dynamics of internal cooperation and competition within ecosystems. This gave them clear limits (Park et al., 1925) and, in consequence, the city was not conceived as a continuum, but as multiple, fairly independent fragments in juxtaposition, with limited interaction among them (Suttles, 1972).

According to Park and his colleagues, neighbourhoods, as part of a 'natural' order, were bearers of values that ensured the cohesive socialisation of their members and provided a refuge from the threat of impersonal life (Park et al., 1925). Thus the neighbourhood community was to be protected, promoted and restored (Bettin, 1982; Martínez, 1999). In this framework, the social setting and organisation of the city are primarily conceived as natural processes that escape social responsibility. Thus it would be possible, even desirable, to act on each neighbourhood as an independent and self-contained unit without worrying about the structural conditions that produce it or about impacts beyond its borders.

Since the 1980s, in line with neo-liberal conceptions that claimed the community as a space that ought to be free from state coercion, a neo-ecological idea of the neighbourhood re-emerged as the dominant conception of neighbourhood (Madden, 2014). The power of map-making – classifying, separating and simplifying urban communities – helped (Suttles, 1972). The clout of this neighbourhood notion is based on its ideological nature – its capacity to embody 'common sense' for understanding urban relationships and belonging (Lefebvre, 2013). As Jane Jacobs (1961, 112) once said, neighbourhood is 'a word that sounds as a Valentine's poem'.

Consequently, the neighbourhood has been presented as the ideal urban governance scale of what has been called the 'new localism' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002) – the search for solutions to social and economic problems through the transferring of responsibility to local areas (Martin, 2003; Wood, 2005). This gets reified by what some have called the 'local trap' – 'the tendency to assume that the local scale is preferable to other scales' (Purcell, 2006, 1921). This implies that if problems are produced inside the neighbourhood, then they must be solved within its limits (Garnier, 2011). This renewed attention to neighbourhoods fits within a neo-liberal agenda that uses urban spaces to obtain surplus value through gentrification, segregation and overproduction of exclusive urban spaces (Anguelovski et al., 2019; Davidson, 2008; Harvey, 1997; Rolnik, 2013).

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That dominant neighbourhood conception has consolidated through multiple public programmes (Atkinson et al., 2009). These programmes work in a focalised way by defining delimited areas of intervention according to lack of infrastructure and levels of poverty, avoiding discussions of the urban logics, economic systems or urban politics that cause existing problems. Under this conception, the city inhabitant is never considered in his/her right to produce space from critical reflection about his/her role in society and relationships with the state and the market, capable of defining broader political horizons (Letelier, 2018; Tapia, 2018).

The dominant view of the neighbourhood is located in 'absolute space': a fixed, container space that influences its confined objects without receiving reciprocal actions (Harvey, 2012; Massey, 2007). The neighbourhood thus conceived limits the form and scope of neighbourhood relations. It defines its spatiality on the logic of residential proximity and prioritises strong bonds at the expense of weak links (Wellman, 1979; 2001). This ideal of 'community' denies the complexity derived from the temporal and spatial frames that characterise social processes (Young, 2000). The community thus contained inside the neighbourhood would be the only working force of cohesion (Suttles, 1972; Wellman, 2001). Space is hereby commonly conceived as independent from forces, institutions and policies that (re)create it (Lefebvre, 2013; Madden, 2014). Therefore, subjects would restrict their agendas to the daily reproduction of such communities, disconnecting them from the structural causes of the neighbourhoods' problems, provincialising their strategies accordingly. The neighbourhood conception as an absolute space is (re)produced through geographies of contained urban relationships, restricting the subjects' capacity to intervene in relational spaces. Urban relationships are stripped from their potential for transforming complex urban communities, (re)producing instead geographies of containment (Tapia, 2018). Such fragmentation of space prevents actors from realising the potential of joint action and the resources that it could mobilise (Letelier, 2018; Letelier et al., 2018).

In contrast to this rigid conceptualisation, we adopt a relational notion, whereby the neighbourhood is what neighbours do – their relationships and networks – (Rodríguez, 2008; Wellman, 2001). The neighbourhood only exists after the relationships that are established within it and to/from it and is transformed by the links, networks and flows that it maintains within and with other spaces at different scales (Massey, 2012). The neighbourhood, therefore, is a social field that continuously (re)produces and transforms relationships. Making an analogy with Lefebvre's distinction between the city and the urban (Brenner 2017), a neighbourhood is an object taken for granted to describe urban social life, whereas a relational neighbourhood is an assembling and dis/reassembling process (Irazábal, 2022; Sweet, 2020). Assemblage thinking asserts that the relationships of component parts of bodies are not stable and fixed but can be displaced and replaced within and among other bodies (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

Conceiving the neighbourhood as relational implies that its content is defined and

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redefined by subjects' relationships, uses, needs and strategies (Keller, 1979; Suttles, 1972). A relational neighbourhood is built on social practices; as a lived space, it is a space of possibilities, open to and moulded by social creativity (Lefebvre, 1969; Merrifield, 2011; Purcell, 2014). It also implies understanding it at the crossroads of the local and the global – transbordering (Irazábal, 2014). De-anchoring processes in our era means that social relationships can be detached from local interaction contexts and restructured in indefinite and fluxing time–space intervals (Giddens, 1993). Both local and global (glocal) dimensions affect how the neighbourhood's social order is (re)constructed (Massey, 2012). As spatial constraints weaken, everyday 'proximity' relations become more complex and unbound by physical propinquity (Villasante, 1999). Instead of thinking of places as areas contained within finite limits, one can imagine them as articulated fields in relationship networks and social interpretations built on fluxing scales (Irazábal, 2014).

In the common conception of neighbourhood, strong bonds (Wellman, 1979; Wellman and Leighton, 1979; Young, 2000) of contained communities dominate within delimited urban spaces without contact with communities from different areas. However, neighbourhood relations are not constrained by the residential realm as the privileged place for strong bonds. These can also be established according to different degrees of proximity/distance concerning local/global dynamics; considering relational neighbourhoods in proximity/distance dialectics builds on both strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). The relational neighbourhoods that emerge in this way dispute the idea of communities exclusively constituted by relationships of reciprocity and solidarity (Panfichi, 1996), understanding instead the communities as cultural and collective assemblages of varying social relations (conflictive and non-conflictive), from fluid encounters to durable engagements, not necessarily anchoring in specific or unique places (Blokland, 2017). Understanding relational neighbourhoods from this perspective, a more complex image emerges: a set of actors – individuals, groups, organisations and/or communities – linked to each other through one or more social relationships (Wellman, 1979). These relationships are based on different tie patterns, levels and proximity/distance types that can transcend the boundaries of encapsulated areas (Sanz, 2003).

We thus define neighborhood relational geographies as a combination of spatialities, structures and functions that organisational networks (built on strong and weak ties) adopt in given times and spaces. According to the characteristics of their neighbourhood, social actors develop different agendas and strategies, producing diverse forms of territoriality assumed as exercises of power by urban agents in relation to space (Lopes de Souza, 2016; Raffestin and Butler, 2012).

Based on reviews of theoretical and empirical works addressing the limits of the neighbourhood, Park and Rogers (2014) propose a framework of four territorial levels to observe neighbourhood relations. The first is the micro-neighbourhood, the unit to study

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relatively close relationships. The second level is the residential neighbourhood, composed of sets of blocks or streets, relatively homogeneous physical and socio-economic places. At this scale, it is possible to develop in-person participatory planning processes. The third level is an institutional neighbourhood or district, encompassing various residential neighbourhoods along with other types of land use (e.g. schools, healthcare centres and so on). This level is the sphere of urban conflict, threats against which people join together in certain spaces and times. Finally, there is the community, a group of districts from a city that cover relatively large areas. This is the level of struggle for welfare provision and distribution in the city that, according to Merrifield (2011), is also global, referring, e.g., to employment, migration, education and pensions.

Neighbourhood relations can organise on one or more levels at the same time, and each of them involves different and potentially complementary spatialities. Even though territorial units are usually a product of larger-scale urban (re)structuring processes, they may also participate in their own (re)production and the city's (Lefebvre, 2013). Facing this dilemma, Jacobs (1961) argued that the residential neighbourhood would be too large to possess effective capabilities or real meaning for everyday urban living, and at the same time too small to function as an area capable of building power. Jacobs's commitment to the district and her understanding of it as a place of political function derives from its purported capacity to mediate between politically helpless neighbourhoods and the powerful city. The districts would thus be mediators of real-life experience at the neighbourhood level and of policies and objectives at the city level.

We extend Jacobs's conception of a district to refer to relational neighbourhood geographies with the capacity to articulate everyday-life issues with the sphere of urban decision making. These complex neighbourhood geographies should link diverse living spatialities through flexible organisational structures. Other authors, such as Keller (1979), Wellman (1979; 2001), Suttles (1972) and Massey (2005), make proposals that conceive of neighbourhoods as relational, networked and interactive with the environment.

Relational neighbourhood geographies in Chile and Spain

We explore the production of relational neighbourhood geographies in two different neighbourhood articulation processes, one in the Nou Barris district in the city of Barcelona (Figure 1), Spain, and the other in the Arturo Prat Neighbourhood Unit, in Talca, an intermediate city of Chile (Figure 2). They are neighbourhood spaces of medium size compared to their cities and present relatively similar socio-economic conditions.[1]

1 Both the district scale in the case of Barcelona, and that of Neighborhood Units in the case of Chile, correspond to what was previously defined as an institutional neighborhood or district (Park and Rogers, 2014).

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Figure 1
Map of Barcelona highlighting Nou Barris
Source: Google Maps

Figure 2
Map of Talca highlighting Arturo Prat
Source: Google Maps

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These neighbourhoods' articulation trajectories, understood as a continuum of episodes of neighbourhood articulation and fragmentation, have developed in different historical, institutional and political contexts, which allow us to analyse the production of relational neighbourhoods under diverse conditions. At the same time, both cases are related to processes of dictatorship, democratic transition (Vera, 2019a; 2019b; 2020) and neo-liberal socio-spatial restructuring (Jiménez et al., 2018; Dattwyler and Janoschka, 2014). Thus, while in Spain the neighbourhood movement gained special strength towards the end of the Franco dictatorship, in Chile this process was abruptly interrupted by the Pinochet dictatorship. However, in both cases there was institutional cooptation of the movements, especially in the context of the neo-liberal restructuring of the 1990s, which reinforces the interest of this comparison. In both cases, an ideological notion of 'neighbourhood' clearly appears as an instrument of legitimation of the urban policies undertaken: who would oppose an urban policy that focuses its efforts on the neighbourhood scale? In the best tradition of the Chicago school, differences between neighbourhoods were not analysed but described, and inequalities were fought undertaking top-down initiatives.

We used qualitative methodology and critical discourse analysis (Wodak and Meyer, 2009) to examine the case studies. We conducted semi-structured interviews with neighbourhood leaders from both territories, and analysed documents from neighbourhood organisations and municipal governments. Journalistic material and academic and media papers covering the experiences were also examined. The analysis was structured around four large categories: (1) the neighbourhoods' articulation and historical trajectories; (2) their structure, dynamics and characteristics; (3) their contexts; and (4) the effects on neighbourhood territories.

In the case of Arturo Prat Neighbourhood Unit, we conducted seventeen interviews, ten in 2015 and seven in 2017. In 2015, the sample included territorial leaders of different ages, both men and women. A complementary selection criterion was the trajectory of the subjects within the neighbourhood process, thus incorporating people who were there from its inception and others who had engaged later in the process. In 2017, we conducted interviews with leaders and non-leader participants. The sample was constructed considering different levels of involvement in the neighbourhood process: high involvement, low involvement and leaders who were not involved. Data from the interviews were complemented by analysing documents produced by the residents themselves with the support of the Territorial and Collective Action Program. One of the most relevant documents was the 'Socio-territorial diagnosis of Territory 5' (Letelier et al., 2019). The socio-demographic data of the territory were gathered from publicly accessible government sources from the National Institute of Statistics (INE), the Neighbourhood Regeneration Program, and the Municipality of Talca.

In the case of Nou Barris, we conducted five semi-structured interviews with leaders of neighbourhood organisations in 2019 and examined six pre-recorded

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interviews and 32 press records on Nou Barris (Cano, 2017). We also analysed the document produced by the organisations themselves, especially 'It is not poverty, it is injustice', prepared in 2012. Finally, we consulted five open-access government sources from the Barcelona government.

Neighbourhoods, dictatorships and democratic transitions

During the Franco dictatorship (1939–1975), the neighbourhood movement in Barcelona and other Spanish cities articulated diverse social and political organisations, representing one of the most active social fields of political resistance, together with trade unions (Castells 1983). The movement defended civil and housing rights and resisted large speculative projects (Mesa, 2017) and was a political actor with the capacity to think and to act at the city scale (Borja, 1975). It articulated association networks to address problems that went beyond the neighbourhoods themselves. The trade union movement further influenced the neighbourhood movement's logic of escalating urban struggles (Borja, 1975). The interactions within and between neighbourhoods allowed the involvement of associations with broader social structures to exchange concerns, actions and help. As a result, one-third of neighbourhood associations' actions were oriented to the scale of the city or the region (Gail, 1979).

With the return of democracy (1978), the neighbourhood movement underwent a gradual process of cooptation and institutionalisation (Villasante and Gutiérrez, 2000) that marked the subsequent evolution of municipal urban policy. In Barcelona, the period of consensus building between the new authorities and neighbourhood associations extended from 1979 to 1983. From then until 1990, new regulations for district decentralisation and citizen participation were established. The first regulation established legal participatory rights while creating a bureaucratisation that made citizen involvement and deliberations in public affairs more difficult (Villasante, 2000). The second regulation enacted the decentralisation of districts and their administrative competencies in 1984 (Borja, 2001).

Between 1990 and 2000, with the creation of several community plans, emphasis was placed on strengthening the neighbourhood community spaces more than their relationships with policy making or the production of the city. Since the year 2000, municipal political actions have focused on intervening in the neighbourhoods with the greatest deficiencies and rationalising citizen participation. Through the approval of Law 2/2004, the Generalitat de Catalunya (Catalan autonomous government) defined a framework for the improvement of neighbourhoods, towns and urban areas that required special attention. In 2008, the administration committed to linking the processes of citizen participation with neighbourhood decentralisation, approving the programme Barcelona's Neighbourhoods (Els Barris de Barcelona). This institutionalised the municipal division into 73 neighbourhoods, creating a new organisation

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for participation: the Neighbourhood Council (Bonet, 2012). Finally, the progressive municipal administration at the head of the city government since 2015, taking inspiration again from Law 2/2004 and with the technical leadership of the University of Barcelona Oriol Nel·lo, established the Neighbourhood Plan in Barcelona, which 'sets in motion social, economic and urban actions to improve the most needy neighbourhoods' (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2017b).

Institutionalisation has been the dominant process transforming the relationships between neighbourhoods and the production of the urban in Barcelona. Participation by irruption, which problematises the given notions of public interests and establishes bridges between the particulars and the universal, has been replaced by participation by invitation, through the initiatives of public authorities, structured in government-sanctioned organs, participatory mechanisms and processes (López, 1993). This is akin to the notions of 'invented' (by the people, with or without public support or approval) versus 'invited' (by public agencies controlling participatory processes) spaces of participation discussed in other contexts (Miraftab, 2004; Irazábal, 2008).

The institutionalisation of relationships between neighbourhoods and the city used the neighbourhood scale as the base. The strong neighbourhood movement of the 1970s, articulated at the city level, was gradually contained spatially. It developed in districts and neighbourhoods and manifested itself in the communities' agendas and demands, limited to problems at a local scale based on local participatory regulations. Despite this, the potential for neighbourhood articulation and politicisation continued to be expressed in certain situations and territories by a hive of small activist groups.

As in the Spanish case, the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973–1989) is relevant to understanding the processes of neighbourhood articulation in Chile. Until 1973, neighbourhood organisations experienced a strong process of organisation and empowerment. Recognising the grass-roots organisation process, in 1968 the first Law of Community and Neighbourhood Organization Boards was enacted. This law recognised an existing reality through two components (Delamaza, 2016). First, it equated the territorial and organisational scales; therefore, for each neighbourhood unit, there was only one neighbourhood organisation with legitimacy to act on behalf of the entire population. Second, it assigned responsibilities for promoting associative processes and planning to the organisation.

With the 1973 *coup d'état* and the civic–military dictatorship of Pinochet, this process was cut short. Although the grass-roots social movement was a fundamental part of the resistance, its members were victims of prolonged repression that weakened their organisational capacity (Espinoza, 2003). Several measures forced the relocation of population, breaking neighbourhood relationships and reorganising population within ghettos of poverty, distrust and terror (Valdés, 1983; Silva, 2012).

During the dictatorship, a new Act of Attributions and Organisation of the Municipalities was promulgated (Act 1289 of 1976 and its deepening with Act 18.695

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of 1988). It restricted local political discussion and reconceived municipalities as intermediate spaces for demanding urban facilities and services, alienated from policy discussions about the country's political project (Tapia, 2018). Finally, before the end of the dictatorship, the Neighbourhood Meetings Act (1976) was modified (Act 18.695 of 1988), leading to political disarticulation between territories and organisations, since it allowed the existence of several neighbourhood committees in each neighbourhood's territory (Drake and Jaksic, 1999). The municipal reform and the new Act configured a new notion of the local: the municipality with new and wide attributions and neighbourhood committees without political articulation among them. A process of citizenship depoliticisation ensued, with community participation focused on the everyday and the locality, oblivious to larger political discussions and limited to residential and work spaces (Monje-Reyes, 2013). The dictatorship produced strong effects on grass-roots organisations. Their struggles were fragmented, and their agendas were confined to the community sphere (Espinoza, 2003). Grass-roots organisations were patronised by government programmes, which promoted competition among them (Monje-Reyes, 2013).

In the governments after the dictatorship, these processes continued. The neighbourhood legal framework was maintained, reinforced by the policy of housing subsidies in ways that are difficult to dismantle (Letelier and Irazábal, 2018). Grass-roots organisations multiplied, each with limited jurisdiction (200 families was enough to form one), and they focused on solving their own problems. The logic of fragmentation was reinforced with subsidies and competitive funds, which kept the neighbourhoods in permanent rivalry (Delamaza, 2016; Espinoza, 2004). Instead of setting their own agendas, the organisations specialised in matching their projects with the objectives set by public policies (Márquez, 2004).

With the return of democracy, the neighbourhood became the fundamental territorial scale to address the problems of poverty and urban inequality in the growing processes of neo-liberalisation. The names of the programmes created by the Ministry of Housing and Urbanism reveal this. The first programme on a neighbourhood scale was Barrio Chile (1997–2006), then I Love my Neighbourhood (Quiero mi Barrio, 2006–2010), later the Neighbourhood Recovery Program (Programa de Recuperación de Barrios, 2010–2014), and currently, a second generation of the I Love my Neighbourhood programme (2014–2017). The instrumentalisation of this concept of neighbourhood has recreated a new type of local fabric, with the consequences of neo-liberal urban policies – sprawled and segregated growth, with low-quality collective environments and facilities – combined with the effects on neighbourhood organisation – atomisation, competition and myopic neighbourhood agendas. The result has been the organisational fragmentation of territories and a shrunk capacity for collective action to discuss and modify urbanisation processes (Delamaza, 2016; González, 2016).

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Nou Barris and Arturo Prat neighbourhoods

We demonstrate the idea of complex relational neighbourhoods analysing two neighbourhood processes, one in the district of Nou Barris, Barcelona, and another in Arturo Prat neighbourhood, Talca. They are neighbourhood spaces of average size in their cities and with similar relative socio-economic conditions. However, their articulation trajectories have developed in different historical, institutional and political contexts, which allows us to analyse the production of relational geographies under diverse conditions.

Nou Barris, Barcelona

Nou Barris became one of the ten districts of Barcelona in 1984, with the approval of the current municipal division. Located on the north-east steep side of the city, it has a population of 164,881 people, representing 10.3 per cent of the city's total population (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2018b). It is formed of 13 neighbourhoods, eight of which are among ten of the poorest neighbourhoods in the city (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2017a).

During the 1950s and 1960s, Nou Barris welcomed many migrants from several autonomous regions, such as Andalusia, Extremadura and Galicia, who settled in self-built or new social housing. Since the 2000s, migration rates have kept high with the arrival of people from Latin America, Africa and Asia. Its migrant population rose from 4,961 in 2001 to 27,000 in 2010. Between 1950 and 1970, housing construction rates accelerated in Barcelona, and Nou Barris experienced substantial growth. However, until the 1990s these new neighbourhoods lacked minimum services and were physically detached from the city centre (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2018a; Borja, 1975). Urban precarity, coupled with political discontent towards the Franco regime, fostered collaborative work amongst neighbours, political cadres and left-wing professionals (Andreu, 2015). In 1970, as a response to the Torre Baró–Vallbona–Trinitat Partial Plan causing the displacement of many residents, the Nou Barris Neighbourhood Association was established (Andreu, 2015).

During the 1970s and the 1980s, articulation between neighbourhoods was strengthened through the joining of more organisations and associations. There was a growing demand for improvements in access to housing and public space, sports and cultural facilities, health services, public transportation and connectivity with the rest of the city. A milestone of this movement was when an asphalt plant was put out of business and turned into the Ateneu Popular de Nou Barris cultural centre in 1977 (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2018a; Sasa, 2013). The capacity for collective action deployed in this episode of articulation allowed the Nou Barris Association to negotiate with the first elected town council to attain other facilities and services for infants, young people and senior citizens (Sasa, 2013).

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The 1970s and 1980s were a period of vindications because Nou Barris lacked basic services. In the 1990s, larger facilities began to be obtained: hospitals, schools and cultural and youth centres. Spain enjoyed a booming economy. Neighbourhoods achieved progress on urban developments and local governments were open to their demands. As a result, social mobilisation decreased, and neighbourhood leaders began to look more closely into their individual realities (Cano, 2017). Unemployment was low and the government largely took care of neighbourhoods' demands. This caused social mobilisation to decrease. Each neighbourhood began to look inwards. A degree of coordination amongst associations and organisations was maintained but did not lead to any significant joint action. A board of coordinators continued to meet once a month. However, since the city council was also more agreeable, each neighbourhood was able to foster direct dialogue with it (Direction districte Nou Barris). As a leader of the Nou Barris district explained,

> People had jobs (there was not so much economic hardship), a series of facilities had been obtained and the administration was running them … a government that attended to neighbourhood demands. The sum of these caused social mobilization to decrease. In addition, as mobilization decreased globally, the entities of each neighbourhood began to look a little more at their navels. This did not mean that there was no networking since the Coordination continued to meet once a month. But as from the City Council there were also more avenues for dialogue, each entity went to specify their own [needs], although this does not mean that it was to the detriment of the others; but it does not stop being only for that neighbourhood. (Interview by the authors)

Since the 2010s, however, there has been evidence of growing socioeconomic problems in the district, due to the 2008 recession and the austerity regime assumed after that. This set the Nou Barris networks on alert, and both the 15M and the Indignados movements built momentum to reactivate articulated efforts in the territory. A leader of Ateneu Popular Nou Barris attested to this:

> For a while, the great social issues were solved, but when these big issues were no longer solved because of cuts and the loss of rights began at all levels, it was very easy to work collectively again, as a network. There was no difficulty. It is much more effective to stand in front of the public administration as a whole and with a lot of entities behind it, than if it is done by a dozen people individually. (Interview by the authors)

In 2012, dozens of associations and community networks launched the Nou Barris Cabrejada diu Prou! campaign (Pissed-Off Nou Barris Says Enough!) (Pauné, 2012a). In 2014 the report 'It is not poverty, it is injustice' (Nou Barris Cabrejada diu Prou!, 2014) was published, the product of a large neighbourhood organisation effort since 2012 (Barquero, 2014). The same year, the platform mobilised to demand action from political representatives. Hundreds of neighbours marched on the main streets of

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Barcelona, reaching the city council and the *generalitat* (regional government), where they read a manifesto stating that what many people in Barcelona suffered was not poverty, but injustice. The campaign requested that the district's government hold an extraordinary plenary session in June 2016, from which The Pla d'Acció per la Cohesió i els Drets Socials de Nou Barris 2016–2019 (Plan de Acción para la Cohesión y los Derechos Sociales de Nou Barris 2016–2019) was born (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2016; Guerrero, 2016). It contained management and investment commitments in various areas and was the basis for designing other government measures that strengthened the Nou Barris district as a scale of action.

The geography of Nou Barris has been (re)shaped by continuous social struggles and the ebbs and flows of social networks and organisations. The collaborative effort, started in 1970 by three neighbourhoods, expanded to the whole district and became formalised in 1992 through the creation of the Nou Barris Board of Associations and Neighbourhood Organizations. In 1977, the associative struggle gave rise to the Popular Ateneu, a cultural–political organisation that supported neighbourhood mobilisation. In 1990, the Nou Barris Acull movement was created to facilitate the joining of majority-migrant neighbourhoods. In 2006 the 500x20 association, and in 2013 the Salvem les pensions 9 barris movement, were created to fight for affordable public rents; and in 2014, the Aturats movement was legalised as an assembly after emerging as a result of increased unemployment in Nou Barris.

Nou Barris and its multiple networks have been active in times of crisis, growing their social fabric's cohesion and deepening their joint agendas. Nou Barris's organisation allows acting at a district level, facilitating political agency to address the authorities (Bonet and Martí, 2012; Borja, 1975; Jacobs, 2011). Nou Barris has mechanisms to bring everyday problems into the public sphere. This works along two axes:

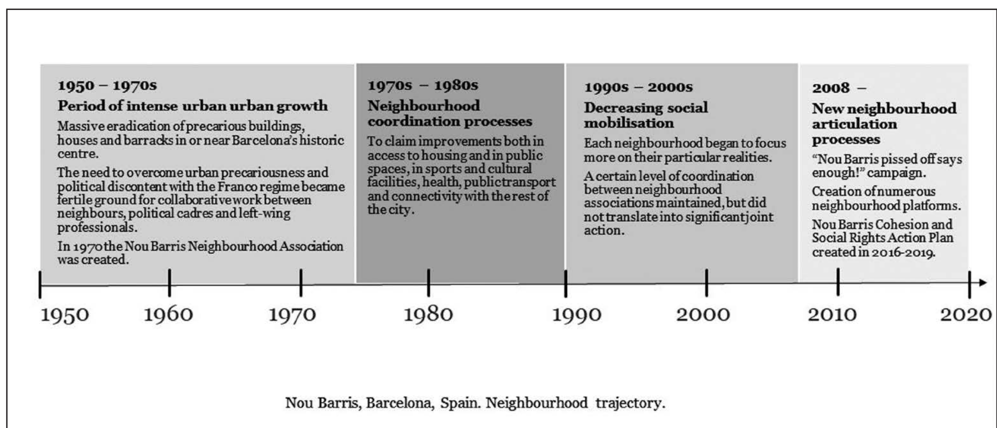

Figure 3 Neighbourhood trajectory of Nou Barris

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first, a territorial axis links everyday spaces (street and neighbourhood) with the larger territory (district) and is made up of organisations in each neighbourhood and the Nou Barris Board of Associations and Neighbourhood Organizations. Second, an issue-based axis brings everyday issues (unemployment, migration, pensions) to the larger sociopolitical context. At the intersection of these two axes, the different organisations and movements of Nou Barris contribute to politicising the neighbourhoods, making visible socio-spatial inequalities and discussions that take place in the territory and its neighbourhoods. The action articulated along these two axes has transformed the spatiality of public policies, forcing Catalonia local governments to operate at the district scale.

In the complex neighbourhood relationality of Nou Barris, we identify the following trends (Figure 3):

- A strong sense of identity and belonging. At the neighbourhood level, this sense is particularly powerful where social and political activity has been long-standing (e.g. Roquetes, Prosperitat). At the district level, there is a unity of action against neo-liberal urban politics that focus on economic development, leaving behind areas that are not business centres.
- A multiplicity of civic initiatives at the neighbourhood level that coordinate in complex associations. This networking provides a greater capacity for action and protest and ensures visibility in the city.

Nonetheless, the hegemonic conception of the neighbourhood is hard to overcome, reproducing itself to a certain extent both within and outside Nou Barris. Nou Barris's struggles tend to be encapsulated in Nou Barris; for others, the district itself operates as a neighbourhood that is and should be contained. In a city that tends to represent itself as homogeneous, Nou Barris is othered, often perceived as poor and combative, and symbolically isolated. The hegemonic conception of neighbourhood is taken for granted also by Nou Barris's residents and activists, demonstrating the notion's usefulness to fragment, isolate, contain and deactivate urban alternatives.

Arturo Prat, Talca

The Arturo Prat Neighbourhood Unit is a territory that includes a group of neighbourhoods located north-east of the city of Talca, an intermediate city (Bellet, 2012) of 230,000 inhabitants and the capital of the Maule region, south of Chile's capital, Santiago. According to the 2017 Census, the area has a population of 10,565 inhabitants and 2,467 dwellings. More than 60 per cent of families belong to the lowest socio-economic strata (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas de Chile, 2002).

The neighbourhood was born in the 1970s as a result of the neighbours' struggle to remain on land that was intended to be used by the armed forces. The families

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managed to stay and obtained support to improve their homes and their environment. Over time there were new processes of expansion of housing complexes, combining state subsidies and family savings. The two penultimate housing complexes to be built were destined for the inhabitants of two eradicated camps built in the 2000s; and three other new sets were for families affected by the 2010 earthquake (Letelier et al., 2019). Among the main socio-urban problems of the neighbourhood are the deficit of green areas, public spaces and infrastructure, and the social and housing insecurity of specific areas (Territorial Program and Collective Action, 2014). Despite its proximity to the main service centres in the region, the area has serious connectivity problems with the city, because it is confined between infrastructures of national hierarchy and a structuring road of the city.

The Arturo Prat Neighbourhood Unit presents acute associative fragmentation: 19 different neighbourhood associations. The first time the different neighbourhood organisations got together was for a participatory budget programme that the municipality of Talca promoted between 2006 and 2007. The organisations formulated projects which were then voted on by the different organisations in the territory, under the logic of competition. Its secondary organisational component was the territorial board, a space in which the organisations coordinated the presentation and voting of projects, allowing leaders to meet and establish links for the first time. With the change of municipal government in 2008, the participatory budget programme ended; and shortly afterward, the territorial board stopped working (Letelier et al., 2019).

However, the links established during 2006 and 2007 allowed leaders to reconvene and articulate in 2009. The stimulus for this second articulation episode was the municipal offer to build a swimming pool in the sector. This initiative, which the new administration was proposing in various areas of the city, was not well received in the neighbourhood. Leaders believed that a family health centre was more needed. Taking advantage of the window of opportunity opened by the municipality, articulated neighbours began a sustained demand for the investment priority to be modified; however, the proposed project implied multiplying the necessary resources by five. After nearly two years of negotiations, in 2011, the mayor committed to the construction of a family health centre. Having achieved its objective, the articulation process receded, and the organisations returned to focus on each of their localities. The experience of associative work was successful, but it did not lead to sustained engagement and the construction of new collective struggles.

The third articulation episode began in 2014 with the support of the Territory and Collective Action (TAC) Program. The work of the TAC led to the formation of a territorial board through which coordination that had begun with the demand for the health centre was reactivated (Letelier et al., 2019). From this associative space, the organisations built a socio-urban diagnosis of the territory and an agenda of projects that began to articulately negotiate with the authorities (Letelier, Tapia, and Boyco,

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2018; Territory and Collective Action Program, 2014). In the account of a leader from Unidad Vecinal Arturo Prat,

> Of course, many more things are achieved, things of greater weight, because by bringing the organizations together they are more listened to by the authority, the authority of any kind. Because, if there are 5 leaders of different neighbourhood councils, behind each of those leaders there are many people. You have to think that a neighbourhood council is satisfied with no less than 200 members, so if there are 5 leaders, then you will have hundreds of people behind all that and of course the authority listens more to a hundred people than just one. (Interview by the authors)

One of the main fruits of these conversations was the construction of a park of 12,000 square meters and an investment of nearly half a million US dollars. The project modified the traditional investment logic focused on micro-interventions in neighbourhoods. For the residents and their organisations, the challenge was to modify the logic of neighbourhood allocations and competition to imagine a large-scale investment project. Another achievement of the process was the municipal decision to participatorily elaborate a master plan for the development of the neighbourhood, the first in the city.

The relationality of Arturo Prat Neighbourhood Unit connected everyday lives with the dynamics of a larger territory. Each neighbourhood participated in the territorial board. Besides, there was support from organisations outside the territory. We identified several trends in Arturo Prat's trajectory (Figure 4):

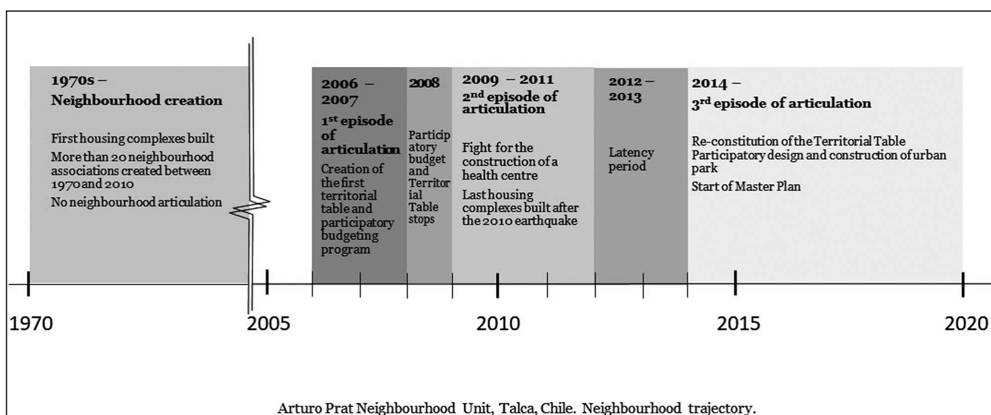

Figure 4 Neighbourhood trajectory of Arturo Prat neighbourhood

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- A gradual, episodic breaking of the neo-liberal conception of neighbourhood. A new collective cognitive map of the neighbourhood space has been gradually created beyond the predefined administrative boundaries, which arises from the new relationships between neighbourhood actors and the denaturalisation of traditional boundaries. This territory is complex, with problems and opportunities conceived on larger scales, and therefore requires more sophisticated political understanding and social action.
- Fragile institutional and issue-based coordination. Coordination practices have fostered a network of neighbourhood associations linked by weak ties uncoupled from the competition rationality to which they were accustomed. However, this coordination is unstable.
- Social learning strengthening political agency. Despite the fragility of relationships, neighbourhood action has transformed their territoriality, previously subjected to public supply logic and limited to everyday issues. Emergent and more symmetrical relationships with the government and the politics of urban problems have been capable of challenging the authorities. A new repertoire of strategies complements this, with technical knowledge and the media playing fundamental roles.
- These neighbourhoods' dynamics have encouraged the municipality to assume a new territorial development agenda. This agenda, through the idea of the territorial master plan, incorporates a level of governance that until now did not exist in Chile: the neighbourhood territory.

Discussion and conclusion

With the evidence collected and analysed, we conclude that the configuration of the neighbourhood is relationally conditioned by the forms and dynamics that weak and strong ties adopt in a given space and time. Although the importance of the relational is observed in both case studies, its characteristics, intensity and complexity are different in each of them. This difference is also expressed in their capacity to produce territoriality.

Regarding relational neighbourhood geographies, the cases coincide in showing that neighbourhood geographies go beyond the physical and ideological boundaries of the neighbourhood concept (as delimited territory) and are preferentially expressed in non-formal or non-conventional organisational forms that adopt non-hierarchical, horizontally networked decision-making structures. Although the district is an existing administrative political scale in Barcelona, most of the city's neighbourhoods do not articulate or build political agendas around this scale. The fact that Nou Barris does it is not strange, if we consider that when Barcelona was divided into districts, the neighbourhood organisations themselves defined the limits of Nou Barris.

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In the case of the Arturo Prat Neighbourhood Unit, something similar happens. The neighbourhood unit is a formal administrative political delimitation; however, in most cases, the organisations are not articulated on this scale. Despite participating in very different historical and political trajectories and showing different modalities and intensities of articulation, both case studies evidence that it is possible to discuss urban practices departing from the hegemony of the dominant conception of neighbourhood. Whether as an autonomous process of updating the historical experience of neighbourhood articulation (in Nou Barris) or promoted with external actors' support (in Arturo Prat), these neighbourhoods showed their ability to scale, to produce new geographies of power and to become protagonists in the city's production.

However, the trajectory of relational neighbourhood geographies has fluctuations in intensity and scale. There are periods when they are active and others dormant; periods when they immerse themselves in neighbourhood work and others in which they act at the district or larger territorial levels. In both cases, the articulation of strong and weak ties seems to be essential. Adopting a multiscalar perspective implies emphasising the idea of weak bonds that work by connecting groups and giving rise to more complex structures (Espinoza, 1998; 2003; Granovetter, 1973; 1983). Granovetter (1973) states that 'the strength of weak links' is that they make it possible to relate distant social circles, whereas strong links do not bridge and link different groups. The case studies show how weak relationships between leaders of groups and organisations are those that allow articulation. At the district and neighbourhood unit level, what connects is not the organisations, but the networks articulated by weak links.

The spatialities, structures and functions adopted by the organisational networks in Nou Barris and Arturo Prat (relational geographies) show us that, despite the influence of policies and discourses that pretend to encapsulate the neighbourhood within a limited geography, the practices of actors can resist this encasement. We have illustrated how, in two contexts as different as the Spanish and the Chilean, while laws, plans and programmes insisted on containing neighbourhoods, actors struggled to build relationships outside this box. We explained how the contexts (political, physical, social, cultural) of Spain and Barcelona, on the one hand, and Chile and Talca, on the other, impact the relational nature of neighbourhoods. Finally, we showed that this relational way of understanding the neighbourhood allows for more democratic governance of the city.

Regarding the production of territorialities, when relational neighbourhood geographies are in motion, territoriality gets amplified towards more complex and holistic agendas and strategies in negotiation with authorities. The complexity of the neighbourhood geography proves effective to participate in the construction of urban life. The articulation of different spatialities based on the construction of neighbourhood networks among organisations anchored in different places encourages the emergence of different action levels with greater capacity to politicise issues and effectively act as partners with authorities.

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Although in both cases a denser, broader and more heterogeneous structure of relationships increases the capacity of communities to build territorialities, the socio-institutional trajectory of the cases causes different effects. Nou Barris shows longer-lasting ties and interactions. Even though its organised neighbourhood geography is old and sometimes not so active, it has never disappeared. On the other hand, Arturo Prat was recently built, and articulation episodes in it have followed others of disarticulation. Each case has its particular structured neighbourhood geography. In Nou Barris, the coordinator of associations and entities joined networks and platforms to establish a dense and variegated geography capable of efficiently articulating scales, making it stronger and more stable. In the case of Arturo Prat, the associative network is restricted to the territorial board, which makes it more fragile. Furthermore, the agenda of Nou Barris's neighbourhoods is complex and multiscalar, understanding housing not only physically, but also concerning human, social and economic rights. In Arturo Prat, although the demands for urban improvements have escalated to higher territorial levels, they are not yet connected with other social struggles such as work, youth rights or social security. In Nou Barris, the push towards articulation and the rising of more complex neighbourhood geographies comes from the inside. The organisations convene to activate their associative action potential. In Arturo Prat, this activation has required external and sustained support. The differentiated effects of their historical and political contexts are manifested: in Spain an institutionalisation process of the neighbourhood movement, and in Chile the destruction of the people's movement at its peak and the creation of fragmented and depoliticised communities.

The historical analysis of our case studies shows ways in which relationality is context-sensitive and how bottom-up resistance produces relationality. The neighbourhood relational geographies' characterisation, intensity and complexity are different, which create distinct capacities to produce territorialities and engage and impact city politics.

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