

Urbanization and Civilization: Public Health Interventions and State-Building in Buenos Aires
1880-1910
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Building A Nation and Hygiene in the “Paris of South America”

“It would be indispensable that the vaccinators penetrate the conventillos...the poor...who for their ignorance and living conditions submit the greatest contingent to smallpox mortality”¹

Torcuato de Alvear, Mayor of Buenos Aires from 1880–1887, proclaimed that compulsory vaccination was necessary for *conventillo*, or tenement house, residents of his city. His mistrust of and dismissiveness toward the working-class immigrant communities who populated the *conventillos* was representative of larger anxieties about cultural degeneration among Argentinian elites. Late nineteenth century Argentines hoped to modernize in line with European standards, which required certain cultural, medical, and intellectual practices. Elites believed that *conventillo* dwellers had cultural deficiencies that corrupted all aspects of their lives and, if they were left untreated, threatened the progress of Argentinian society. An alliance between medical and political elites hoped to contain and mitigate the spread of “uncivilized” cultural attributes into mainstream Argentinian society through government-led public health interventions that controlled population behavior.

The rise of government-sponsored public works projects and rigorous sanitation methods in Buenos Aires at the turn of the twentieth century arose from the medico-political elite’s desire to instill their young nation with a healthy and robust population. State-sanctioned public health initiatives were crucial to nation-building in Latin American countries that had won

¹ *Memoria del Presidente de la Comisión Municipal*, February 1801, 340, quoted in Ernest A. Crider, *Modernization and Human Welfare: The Asistencia Pública and Buenos Aires, 1883–1910* (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1976), 127.

independence from Spain and Portugal.² The initiatives demonstrated the authority of the new governments over the public and private spheres and connected personal health to national progress. Thus, personal health became intrinsically linked to the modernity of the nation. In *fin-de-siecle* Buenos Aires, state-sanctioned construction of public parks, formation of sanitary brigades, and compulsory vaccination of working-class communities demonstrated how liberal elites attempted to civilize at-risk populations by controlling their health behaviors. I argue that an alliance between medically trained political actors, *higienistas*, and elected officials altered the urban spaces in Buenos Aires to control the hygienic and moral behavior of immigrant and working-class populations.

Historical Context

After achieving independence from Spain in 1816, Argentina began the arduous process of nation-building. The development of independent economic and political structures occurred in tandem with a discussion of national culture. Liberal elites in Buenos Aires embraced eugenics and social behavior theories inspired by French psychologist Gustave Le Bon.³ According to these theories, citizens' moral and physical strength was an indicator of national strength and progress. Consequently, Buenos Aires invested in public works projects and public health initiatives to control its population's racial and hygienic “defects.” These projects created an inextricable association of hygiene with individual and national modernity.

The first public health interventions occurred under the dictatorship of Juan de Rosas. His centralization of government power in 1831 allowed his administration to address unhygienic

² Amador, José, *Medicine and Nation Building in the Americas, 1890–1940* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015), 5.

³ Pseudoscientific theories, including Social Darwinism, Eugenics and social psychology established by Le Bon were used extensively in Buenos Aires in criminology, law and to vet immigrants. For more information about the medical fixation on these theories and their applications to the social problems of Buenos Aires, consult Kristen Ruggiero, *Modernity in the Flesh: Medicine, Law, and Society in Turn-of-the-Century Argentina* (2004).

practices. Before the 1830s, slaughterhouses southwest of Buenos Aires dumped waste into the rivers Richauelo and Plate, which provided potable water for *porteños* and flowed into the city's sewers.⁴ These unhygienic conditions were responsible for massive outbreaks of disease and pervasive beliefs that disease seeped into the city from Southern neighborhoods. In 1852 and 1857, the *Consejo de Hygiene Publica* and *Comision de Higene* were created to improve sanitation and legitimize government-led public health interventions. These organizations mandated inspections of factories, quarantined slaughterhouses in the southern suburbs, and instituted sanitary regulations for burials and hospitals.⁵ The development of the Argentinian government included the birth of public health agencies that protected the population and asserted government authority.

Subsequent leaders of Argentina and Buenos Aires invested in public works projects and hygienic reforms during their tenure. The push among elites to modernize Buenos Aires based on European civilizations reflected the wave of Southern European immigrants that entered Argentina from the 1850s to the early 1900s. Between 1854 and 1914, the city's population rose from 90,000 to 1.5 million.⁶ Rapid urbanization created unhygienic standards of living and pollution. Outbreaks of disease were ubiquitous in the industrial Southern neighborhoods near the slaughterhouses, garbage dumps, and tenement houses in the city center. The outbreak of Yellow Fever in 1871 was the breaking point for political figures and medical practitioners. In total, this outbreak killed 10 percent of the city's population. It also caused 50,000 *porteños* to flee the city.⁷ The failure of the government to provide adequate medical care or warning about

⁴ James Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb*, 1870-1910. (Oxford University Press, 1974), 19.

⁵ Carbone, Antonio. 2022. *Park, Tenement, Slaughterhouse: Elite Imaginaries of Buenos Aires, 1852-1880*. (Campus Verlag, 2022), 37.

⁶ Jose Moya, *Cousins and Strangers : Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930*. (Berkley: University of California Press, 1998). 171, 178, 134.

⁷ Carbone, *Park, Tenement, Slaughterhouse*, 107.

the disease sparked public discourse about who was responsible for the health of individuals and the nation. The Yellow Fever outbreak in 1871 revealed the liberal elite's denigratory attitude toward the poor, especially immigrants, and sparked public concern about the sanitary condition of the city.

The establishment of *La Asistencia Publica*, a government Public Assistance Program, in 1883 demonstrated the beginning of federal interest in population health. The organization sponsored sanitary and hygienic interventions that targeted pollution and disease in low-income and immigrant communities. Members of *La Asistencia Publica* and the wider government recognized the economic benefit Buenos Aires received from the low-skilled labor provided by these groups and took a paternalistic approach toward protecting their health. The interest in these populations reflected a desire among medical and political elites to mirror the hygienic practices of industrialized European societies.

Historiography

The emergence of public health initiatives as a component of nation-building processes in Latin America has been studied in the region's urban, medical, and sociopolitical histories. My research paper will build off the descriptive history of urban beautification and re-organization in the late 19th century provided by James Scobie and Jose Moya. Scobie's well-regarded *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870-1910*, contrasted the development of Buenos Aires' city center— a space of economic, political, and cultural significance— with the hygienically motivated investment in poorer neighborhoods. *Plaza to Suburb* outlined urban beautification projects: the broadening of avenues, expansion of plazas, and development of parks and green spaces in traditionally wealthy spaces. In contrast, the less civilized neighborhoods received rudimentary

sanitary reforms. Scobie's comparison of living conditions in *conventillos* and *palacios* blocks apart exemplified how socioeconomic status influenced state and individual health investments. Moya analyzed neighborhood segregation and living conditions in *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires: 1850-1930*. His research incorporated census data to outline how chain migration and industry influenced the demographic and health outcomes of neighborhoods. My discussion of the *conventillos* and their portrayal by Buenos Aires' elite as cesspools of disease and amorality expands on Scobie's and Moya's study of the urban experience in Buenos Aires. *Plaza to Suburb* and *Cousins and Strangers* were written in 1974 and 1998, respectively. This is reflected in the authors' descriptive rather than argumentative style. Primary sources like government ordinances and census data provided the foundation of Moya and Scobie's works and neutral reporting.

More contemporary research about the urban design of Buenos Aires employs a theoretical lens. *Park, Tenement, and Slaughterhouse: Elite Imaginaries of Buenos Aires 1852-1880*, and *The Grid and the Park: Public Space and Urban Culture in Buenos Aires, 1887-1936*, attribute urban modernization between 1850 and 1910 to shifting social and cultural values in Buenos Aires. *Park, Tenement, and Slaughterhouse* by Antonio Carbone argued that French-inspired medical training in elite circles fostered a natural alliance with the government that sought to emulate European culture in Buenos Aires. *The Grid and the Park* by Adrián Gorelik similarly attributed urban beautification projects of the 1880s to the cultural idealization of France. He analyzed urban space as "a material, cultural, and political artifact."⁸ Scobie's and Moya's works are foundational to contemporary studies of Buenos Aires' economic and cultural development. Their descriptive histories are a neutral source that provide a baseline for

⁸Adrián Gorelik and Natalia Mailuf, *The Grid and the Park: Public Space and Urban Culture in Buenos Aires 1887-1936*, (Latin American Research Commons, 2022), 4.

contemporary historians' more theoretical research. I rely on the different historical reconstructions of Buenos Aires' urban transformation in the early 20th century to explain how public space and culture produce each other.

Promenades and the Public: The Development of Parks for Hygienic and Cultural

Purposes

Generations of hygienic and political leaders lamented that Buenos Aires lacked “the lungs to breathe” without parks and green spaces like European and American cities.⁹ The use of the city-body metaphor and the conceptualization of parks as a vital organ of the city explains the intentionality of their construction and their cultural significance. The first major park created in Buenos Aires was *Parque de Tres de Febrero* by President Sarmiento in 1874. Located in *barrio* Palermo, the park was named after the Battle of Caseros on February 3, 1852, which marked the defeat of dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas. *Parque de Tres de Febrero* was built on the remains of Rosas' estate. Sarmiento hoped that the redistribution of land from private to public use would transform Palermo into “an object of public interest,” with “monuments of savage tyranny... converted into instruments of civilization and progress.”¹⁰ Political and medical elites believed that government investment in urban beautification would unify, modernize, and uproot the “last shoots of the old barbarism” within Buenos Aires.

The park system was utilized by members of the Argentinian government to cultivate positive social and health practices among its citizens. French-Argentine architect Carlos Thays

⁹ Carbone, *Park, Tenement, Slaughterhouse*, 174.

¹⁰ Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, “Discurso inaugural del Parque 3 de Febrero,” November 11, 1875, *Obras completas* (LD), XXII, 13, quoted in Adrián Gorelik and Natalia Mailuf, *The Grid and the Park: Public Space and Urban Culture in Buenos Aires 1887–1936*, (Latin American Research Commons, 2022), 56, 58.

was tasked with the creation of a space that would serve as “a model of what the whole country could be.”¹¹

Carlos Thays’ original design for Palermo and *Parque de Tres de Febrero* is displayed in Figure 1. The park included the Exposición Rural—an exhibition of modern agricultural



Figure 1. "Detail from a Plan of Buenos Aires." c. 1890. In *The Grid and the Park: Public Space and Urban Culture in Buenos Aires, 1887–1936*, by Adrián Gorelik and Natalia Majluf, Fig. 43, 140. Latin America Research Commons, 2022.

technology, a military training school, and botanical and zoological gardens. The design of *Parque de Tres de Febrero* demonstrated how elites and governments used parks and public spaces in the nation-building process. Sarmiento transfigured urban space, intending to foster a shared Argentine identity. The design of *Parque de Tres de Febrero* reflects the cultural values of the new Argentine civilization imagined by Sarmiento. The importance of the “innocent... healthy leisure” that occurred in the park was crucial to the modern Argentine identity. It allowed workers to recover from their shifts and avoid moral or physical vices that would reduce their productivity and

contribution to the Argentine economy and society.¹²

In 1882, Vicente Quesada, who wrote under the pseudonym Lucy Dowling to provide the opinion of a civilized North American traveler, wrote about his experience in *Parque de Tres de Febrero*. Quesada expressed his surprise that the park was empty except on “Sundays and holidays” and that “this is the only city where I have not seen children in the public walks.”¹³

¹¹ Gorelik and Mailuf, *The Grid and the Park*, 58.

¹² Carbone, *Park, Tenement, Slaughterhouse*, 169.

¹³ Lucy Dowling (Vicente Quesada), “La ciudad de Buenos Aires. Apuntes de una iajera,” originally published in the *Nueva Revista de Buenos Aires* in 1882 and quoted in Adrián Gorelik and Natalia Mailuf, *The Grid and the*

Quesada connected the underutilization of the park by the youth to the “current obesity of ladies” who “live shut up in their houses” and do not understand the hygienic value of exercise.¹⁴ A travelogue written by a German tourist, *Stranger’s Guide to Buenos Aires* criticized *Parque de Tres de Febrero*’s lack of shade and the constant presence of the “Haute-volée...showing off dresses, carriages, and horses.”¹⁵



Figure 2. Samuel Boote, *Palermo Park*, c 1885. In *The Grid and the Park: Public Space and Urban Culture in Buenos Aires, 1887–1936* (Latin America Research Commons, 2022), Fig 44. 142.

The appropriation of the park by the wealthy classes to continue their traditional, non-hygienic excursions frustrated working-class communities, and *higienistas*, alike. One reason that the park failed to attract working-class *porteños* was its distance from their neighborhoods. Italian and

Park: Public Space and Urban Culture in Buenos Aires 1887–1936, (Latin American Research Commons, 2022), 138.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ernst Nolte, 1882. *The Stranger’s Guide for Buenos Aires*. 83 p. Buenos Aires: German library, Ernst Nolte. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009779691>.

This travelogue outlines the important sights and activities to a visitor of Buenos Aires in 1882. It mentions Palermo is reachable by tram or railway and has a \$3 entry fee, which is a noteworthy indicator of the travel time and expense required to enjoy it. Once there, the author repeatedly laments that “more attention has been paid to adorning rather than shade-giving trees” and that the grand avenue at Parque de Patricios “excludes from the very beginning the possibility of ever affording a shadow, even in the remotest future.” He comments that there is a “not important but pretty fair collection” of animals that “do not require difficult caretaking”. Situated in the larger context of my essay, this source demonstrates how the regenerative needs of the working class: trees to provide clean air, secluded trails for exercise, and greenery to appreciate after long days indoors were not met by the park. Rather, its form is only suited for promenades for the wealthy, parades, and underwhelming afternoons for this German tourist.

Spanish immigrants, the primary labor force of the slaughterhouses, ports, and factories, lived in Southern neighborhoods or the city center.¹⁶ To visit the park, working-class *porteños* had to take a tram or public transportation, which was barely established in the southern neighborhoods until the early 1910s.¹⁷ The lack of transportation and tram fares excluded working-class populations from the social and hygienic benefits of *Parque de Tres de Febrero*. Instead, the park was more naturally incorporated into the traditional social routines of the upper-class inhabitants of the northern *barrios*.¹⁸

The traditional social hierarchies and prejudices of elites also discouraged working-class and immigrant communities from enjoying the park. Juan de Cominges, a *higienista* and strong advocate of the park's development, commented that:

If the proletarian classes do not attend... let us not blame the distance that separates it from Buenos Aires; let us blame, in the first place, their state of culture, which does not allow them to enjoy the purest pleasures provided by the spectacle of beauty.¹⁹

De Cominges believed that the working class did not take personal responsibility for their health because of their inferior culture and ignorance. His published quote sheds light on the limited efficacy of *Parque de Tres de Febrero* as both a hygienic and cultural project. De Cominges and other elites' prejudice and misinformation about immigrant and working-class populations limited their ability to meet the needs or build trust within their target communities. Working class newspaper, *La Vanguardia* criticized elites, who appropriated *Parque de Tres de Febrero*

¹⁶ For more information about the effects of chain migration on neighborhood segregation, the development of immigrant communities in Buenos Aires, and the difficult process of assimilation for many Southern European immigrants, *Cousins and Strangers* by Jose Moya is an excellent source. In chapter four, his emphasis on neighborhood segregation and the social determinants and health that arose from unequal access to medical assistance and educational opportunities are noteworthy.

¹⁷ Scobie, *Plaza to Suburb*, 88.

¹⁸ Gorelik and Mailuf, *Grid and the Park*, 144.

¹⁹ Juan de Cominges, "Informe sobre Palermo," (1882), quoted in Adrián Gorelik and Natalia Mailuf, *The Grid and the Park: Public Space and Urban Culture in Buenos Aires 1887–1936*, (Latin American Research Commons, 2022), 143.

in an 1894 article titled “Monopoly of Air.” The article defended the right of the city’s “little girls and shoeshine boys to breathe a little air with oxygen” in the parks.²⁰ The stance of *La Vanguardia* reveals the formation of class consciousness among lower-income *porteños*. Working-class communities were aware of the pollution and unsanitary conditions in their neighborhoods and wanted to engage in positive health behaviors. However, they were also aware of the disparities between themselves and the elite who frequented the clean-aired parks. The failure of medical and political elites to understand the needs and culture of working-class communities limited the efficacy of public health interventions. The misguided attempt by Sarmiento to unite the *porteño* population with *Parque de Tres de Febrero* isolated and blamed at-risk communities and failed to foster a common Argentine identity.

Playgrounds and Public Space: Parks in Working-Class Communities

Parque de Tres de Febrero was intended to be a playground for the masses but simply became the grounds of the wealthy due to Sarmiento’s failure to consider geographical and social barriers between the working class and the green space. The underutilization of *Parque de Tres de Febrero* by working-class communities demonstrates the drawbacks of *La Asistencia Publica*’s paternalistic approach to public health. Informed by prejudice rather than fact, *higienistas* believed that immigrant and working-class communities were incapable of handling their health and designed their interventions to control a “dangerous” population.²¹ The

²⁰ La Vanguardia, “Monopoly on Air”, May 19, 1894, quoted in Kindon T Meik., "Disease and Hygiene in the Construction of a Nation: The Public Sphere, Public Space, and the Private Domain in Buenos Aires, 1871–1910." Order No. 3502115, Florida International University, 2011. www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/disease-hygiene-construction-nation-public-sphere/docview/952592966/se-2.

²¹ Julia Rodriguez, *Civilizing Argentina: Science, Medicine and the Modern State* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 178.

higienistas recognized the importance of the labor provided by immigrants and the potential cultural influence they would wield as a growing proportion of the population.²²

Investments in the health and education of the working-class and immigrant communities occurred in tandem with broader urban reform and beautification campaigns. In the early 1900s, a “greenway belt” of parks was built in the southern districts of the city.²³



Figure 3. Instituto Histórico de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires. *Plan of Buenos Aires (detail)*. 1904. In *The Grid and the Park: Public Space and Urban Culture in Buenos Aires, 1887–1936*, by Adrián Gorelik and Natalia Majluf, Fig. 68, 258. Latin America Research Commons, 2022. Note Parque de Patricios’ proximity to *Quema de Basuras* or the garbage incinerator and the pre-existence of industry in the form of railroads and slaughterhouses.

Parque de Patricios, also known as “Palermo of the Poor” was one of the beltway parks. It was built on the remnants of a condemned slaughterhouse in *Barracas* in 1902. Records from the park’s opening ceremony demonstrate the sanitary and cultural need for the park. *El Diario* reported that at the inaugural ceremony, Buenos Aires’ Mayor, Adolfo Bullrich, spoke to a crowd under “a curtain of smoldering smoke [that] indicates the burning of garbage.”²⁴

²² David Rock, *Argentina 1516-1987: From Spanish Colonization to the Falklands War*. Rev. and Expanded Ed (University of California Press), 228.

²³ Mayor Torcuato de Alvear of Buenos Aires requested the expansion of the city limits in 1881 to create a *boulevard de circunvalación* modeled on the Hausmannization of Paris. The creation of these parks was intended to offset the pollution of the industrial districts and secure green space in areas that would be developed in the future. A fuller description of Alvear’s expansion and beautification of the city center can be found in Scobie’s *Plaza to Suburb*.

²⁴ *El Diario* (Buenos Aires) September 11, 1902, quoted in Adrián Gorelik and Natalia Mailuf, *The Grid and the Park: Public Space and Urban Culture in Buenos Aires 1887–1936*, (Latin American Research Commons, 2022), 131.

In the crowd were boys from the Correctional Prison for Young Men who constructed and maintained the park. Bullrich argued that these children were “more wretched than guilty” and they would “receive the fruits of this park. Their instincts, their perversity... will be replaced by work habits... and they will become useful citizens for country and for family.”²⁵ *Parque de Patricios* was saturated with the symbolism of regeneration. Bullrich and other elites absolved children of blame for their uncivilized nature. Instead, they blamed children’s development in an inferior culture for their moral and physical failings. *Parque de Patricios* is an artifact of the Buenos Aires government’s alteration of public space to incentivize positive cultural and hygienic practices.

Elite political and medical authorities used parks like *Parque de Patricios* as a corrective intervention for social woes accelerated by industrialization and modernization. *Parque de Patricios* was run by a *Patronato de Infancia*, or Children’s Foundation, that led exercise classes and supervised care for children in the neighborhood.^{26,27}



Figure 4 and Figure 5. "Gymnastic Exercises at Parque Patricios." Illustration in *Caras y Caretas*, October 3, 1908. In *The Grid and the Park: Public Space and Urban Culture in Buenos Aires, 1887–1936*, by Adrián Gorelik and Natalia Majluf, Fig. 47, 147. Latin America Research Commons, 2023.

²⁵ “Discurso del Intendente Bullrich,” *El Diario* (Buenos Aires) September 11, 1902, quoted in Adrián Gorelik and Natalia Mailuf, *The Grid and the Park: Public Space and Urban Culture in Buenos Aires 1887–1936*, (Latin American Research Commons, 2022), 133.

²⁶ Gorelik and Mailuf, *The Grid and the Park*, 133.

²⁷ A comparison of Figures 4 and 5 with Figure 2 illustrates how the cultivation and form of the parks influenced their utilization by certain communities. The attention paid to making green space and activities for children in *Parque de Patricios* increased their presence. *Parque de Tres de Febrero*’s wide boulevard, unshaded trees, and suburban location were emblematic of its historical elitism and exclusivity.

This organization was part of a larger movement within the Argentine government and *La Asistencia Publica* that aided child development. *Higienista*, Emilio Coni led the specialization of puericulture—the science of growing children—based on early obstetrics and pediatric studies in France.²⁸ Coni believed that government-led homogenization of child development would imbue the next generation of Argentinians with social and physical characteristics that would create a common Argentine identity.²⁹

The presence of the *Patronato de Infancia* in *Parque de Patricios* demonstrates how private health and character were projected onto issues of national well-being. Designating a public space for the health of the working class acknowledged their economic and social contributions to Argentinian society.³⁰ *Parque de Patricos* demonstrates how public spaces influence personal behavior and common identity.

Conventillos: An Unaesthetic and Uncleanly Reminder

Public spaces, such as parks and neighborhoods are places where people gather, relax, and share their cultures. The development of parks and remodeling of neighborhoods played a critical role in the *porteño* elite's quest to create a modern national character and identity. After Buenos Aires' federalization as the nation's capital in 1880, Argentine elites pursued an aesthetic urban renewal that would reflect the modernization of the nation and its people. Mayor Torcuato de Alvear, whose proclamation opened this paper, worked closely with Carlos Thays, the designer of *Parque de Tres de Febrero* and *Parque de Patricios*, to emulate French urban

²⁸ Rodriguez, *Civilizing Argentina*, 118.

²⁹ Donna J. Guy, "Emilio and Gabriela Coni: Reformers, Public Health, and Working Women," in *The Human Tradition in Latin America: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Judith Ewell and William H. Beezley (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1989), 86.

³⁰ The importance of assimilation, especially of second-generation immigrants, is addressed in Jose Ramos Meija's social commentary, "The Modern Crowd." He and other higienistas believed that developing civilized behaviors in immigrant children through public education and physical fitness would expedite their contribution to the "organism" of the new Argentinian society.

structures to signal the modernity of the capital. *Higienistas* such as Guillermo Rawson and Eduardo Wilde provided hygienic justifications for urban renewal, arguing that the urban layout and city center “provided the lungs with which a city breathes.”³¹ The repetition of the city-body metaphor characterizes hygienic and aesthetic control of the city as vital to its survival.

Higienistas declared that *conventillos*, a type of tenement house, would cause cultural and hygienic asphyxiation in Buenos Aires. The word *conventillo* had a derogatory connotation to elite *porteños* during the 1880s: *conventillos* were depicted in popular media as places of disease, contagion, and amoral behavior due to their overcrowding and foreign-born population.³² Jose Moya argued that the attention of the upper classes on “central-city tenements and poverty” revealed more about the “observers than the social ecology of the city.”³³ According to Moya, the proximity of the *conventillos* to the wealthier homes and shopping districts of the city caused anxiety among elites about the spread of poverty and explains their indifference to housing in the suburbs. Alvear’s beautification of the city—intended to project its modernity and sophistication—was undermined by the proximity of social inequality and unsanitary urban spaces.

The *conventillo* was an unaesthetic reminder of the distance between Buenos Aires and modernization. Elites realized that Buenos Aires’ health and civilization were heavily influenced by immigrant and working-class communities, which inspired initiatives to inspect the buildings and contain disease. *La Asistencia Publica* introduced sanitary brigades to police the behaviors within *conventillos* in 1883. The brigades traversed city blocks sanitizing homes where disease had broken out and fining individuals who failed to report their own or their neighbors’

³¹ Carbone, *Park, Tenament Slaughterhouse*, 103.

³² Carbone, *Park, Tenament, Slaughterhouse*, 107.

³³ Moya, *Cousins and Strangers*, 170.

sickness.³⁴ The brigades failed to address the wider problem: the unsanitary conditions of the *conventillos* themselves. The buildings, meant for twenty-five people often housed more than three hundred.³⁵ The lack of housing regulation in Buenos Aires allowed landlords to overpopulate their buildings without providing proper sanitary amenities to their tenants. The fixation on the *conventillo* dweller as the vector of disease, rather than the systemic housing crisis facing the city, demonstrates how the bias of the medical and political elite limited the efficacy of their interventions and contributed to the plight of at-risk populations.

Government infiltration of the private sphere included a compulsory smallpox vaccination campaign of *conventillo* dwellers in 1887. Mayor Alvear partnered with Jose Ramos Mejia, the first director of *La Asistencia Publica*, to institute home vaccinations. According to Alvear, “it would be indispensable that the vaccinators penetrate [the 2,000] *conventillos*” because “the poor...who for their ignorance and living conditions submit the greatest contingent to smallpox mortality.”³⁶ Alvear was influenced by popular beliefs among elites that the cultural deficiencies and ignorance of working-class porteños increased their likelihood of disobeying vaccination orders. Therefore, forceful and invasive measures were warranted. Ramos Mejia echoed similar sentiments about the “awkward” immigrant and the importance of assimilating

³⁴ Carbone, *Park, Tenement Slaughterhouse*, 160.

³⁵ Scobie’s *Plaza to Suburb* further addresses the causes of the overcrowding, including the ineffective infrastructure of the city and lack of affordable housing options. The railroad and tram lines of Buenos Aires remained underdeveloped in the 1870s-1900s, especially in poorer communities. This forced port and factory workers to live within walking distance to their jobs. Steep rents, especially during the economic stagnation of the 1890s, also prevented *conventillo* dwellers from buying homes or moving away from the city.

³⁶ *Memoria del Presidente de la Comisión Municipal*, February 1801, 340, quoted in Ernest A. Crider, *Modernization and Human Welfare: The Asistencia Pública and Buenos Aires, 1883–1910* (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1976), 127.

and controlling their cultural defects to prevent the “degeneration” of the “collective organism” of Argentine society.³⁷

The beliefs espoused by de Alvear and Ramos Meija explain the aggressive infiltration of the private sphere by government authorities. *Porteño* elite feared the spread of sanitary and cultural contagion by immigrant communities that would degenerate the “collective organism” of Argentine society. Their wariness of the immigrant communities’ ability to follow vaccination orders is explained by their association of hygiene with national character. To men such as Ramos Meija and Alvear, uncivilized nations produced uncivilized populations whose actions and habits reflected their inferiority. The waves of immigrants from “undesirable” nations, such as Italy and Spain, threatened the cultural sophistication of Argentina. Therefore, in Buenos Aires, elites sought to control public and private spaces to imbue their population with values, such as hygiene, that would support the nation’s claim to modernity.

The growth of government-sponsored public works projects and health interventions in *fin-de-siecle* Buenos Aires indicates the wider conception among the political and medical elite that disease was a symptom of degeneration, weakness, and barbarism. *Parque de Patricios* is an artifact of the government’s commitment to healing the moral and physical ailments of *porteños*. The park’s strategic location and its operation by the *Patronato de Infancia*, or Children’s Foundation, illustrates how public spaces can influence population behaviors. The park’s creation under “smoldering smoke” and “burning garbage” transformed the health and social habits of neighborhood and its inhabitants.³⁸ *Parque de Patricios* successfully instilled positive

³⁷ José María Ramos Mejía, “The Modern Crowd,” trans. Patricia Owen Steiner, in *The Argentina Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Gabriela Nouzeilles, Graciela Montaldo, Robin Kirk, and Orin Starn (New York: Duke University Press, 2002), 183-187, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822384182-028>.

³⁸ *El Diario*, 1902, quoted in Adrián Gorelik and Natalia Mailuf, 133.

health and social behaviors-- spending time outside, exercise, and child education—in its community because the park was integrated into the pre-existing social and geographic fabric of the neighborhood. The transformation of *Parque de Patricios* aligned with the larger goals of elite Argentines: to rid working-class populations of cultural and physical degeneration. Through health-focused, public works projects Argentine elites hoped to strengthen the moral and physical health of their new nation. The transformation of Buenos Aires' public and private spheres in the late 19th century demonstrated the importance of physical health to the “modernity” of a country. With the formation of public parks, sanitary standards, and vaccination campaigns, the Argentine government hoped to imbue its population with positive health behaviors that would conquer disease and support the nation's transformation from a Spanish colony to a world power.

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