

By Right or Might: notes on the MPL-Collective's self-managed social housing projects

GONZALO MUNOZ-VERA

Carleton University

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This essay discusses the MPL's experience (People on Fight Movement), a Chilean collective on its built and self-managed housing projects to date. Its perseverant hard work is slowly showing results in a country that neglects the urgency of accessing decent housing and resists constant natural disasters proper from the region. Relevant to what this collective has achieved is the history of Chilean housing policy, particularly during the second half of the twentieth century and right before Chile's dictatorship era, which this paper also refers to. Besides, this paper comments on the strenuous task of carrying out and materializing housing projects created along with future dwellers on the territory they have always lived in. In front of current neoliberal social housing policies, the MPL collective has struggled to concretize its members' housing demands and bring back former lines of action on this matter. From the perspective of someone who joined the MPL, the role and involvement of architects in providing support and guidance to these collectives in order to channel their demands appropriately and successfully remains fundamental. In this way, this paper aims to invite other architects to contribute to community organizations seeking better housing conditions.

INTRODUCTION

In Chile, under dictatorship, the urban planning policies imposed since 1978 forced the relocation of vulnerable communities towards the growing periphery of the Greater Santiago area (GSA).¹ Those strategies caused predictable inequalities in people's quality of life and city design, such as limited access to goods and services, inefficient public transportation from and towards the city centre, and class division. After constant indifference and futile responses from governmental authorities, members of the MPL collective have confronted the housing crisis since its foundation in 2006, voicing people's demands to own a house within their district. Through radical action and self-management proposals, the MPL collective has implemented active measures to make their demands heard, representing the Penalolén district in the GSA. The task has been far from simple. However, after arduous work that includes protests, effective organization, and mobilization, they have materialized social housing projects that

emerged from participatory design among dwellers along with the assistance of voluntary architects and related trades. Those assistants have shared the MPL's vision of contributing to city-making and living from dwellers' perspectives over private and real-estate interests shaping today's city's future.

Consequently, the allusion to Chile's national motto ("*By Right or Might*") in this paper's title responds to the current circumstances in which this phrase has resurfaced in the public realm. Deeply questioned by the country's populace in recent years, this motto remains inscribed under the national coat when dialoguing seems more appropriate than imposing rules by *Might*. However, the motto has remained and perhaps summarises what has historically happened in the country regarding social housing solutions, which is intrinsically rooted in the territories where this conflict unfolds, as we will see later. Hence, this essay postulates that the condition under Chile's national motto has influenced (directly or indirectly) the MPL's urgent and self-managed housing response. Before, a brief account of the Chilean housing policy during the second half of the twentieth century is presented as a contextual framework.

CHILEAN HOUSING POLICY: A BRIEF (AND ALWAYS NECESSARY) REMINDER

In Chile, the second half of the twentieth century is marked by the official assimilation of the Modern Movement, already consolidated in Europe and North America. The Modern Movement coupled with several urgent measures of housing and hygiene improvement that led the national debate at the dusk of the twentieth century, mainly due to the rural-to-urban migration along the country.² The precarious and deregulated practices in construction and architectural training favoured such opening to new schools of thought, which aimed at function's efficacy and factual materialization of projects to a country constantly affected by natural disasters, particularly earthquakes. Therefore, the radical changes introduced in architectural education due to the reforms that students demanded (and obtained) were supported by the Institute of Architects' foundation in 1942. This institution drastically strengthened the discipline of architecture in both union and professional terms. Meanwhile, the succeeding governments recognized the urgency of constructive matters in a "developing" country that considered copper extraction its

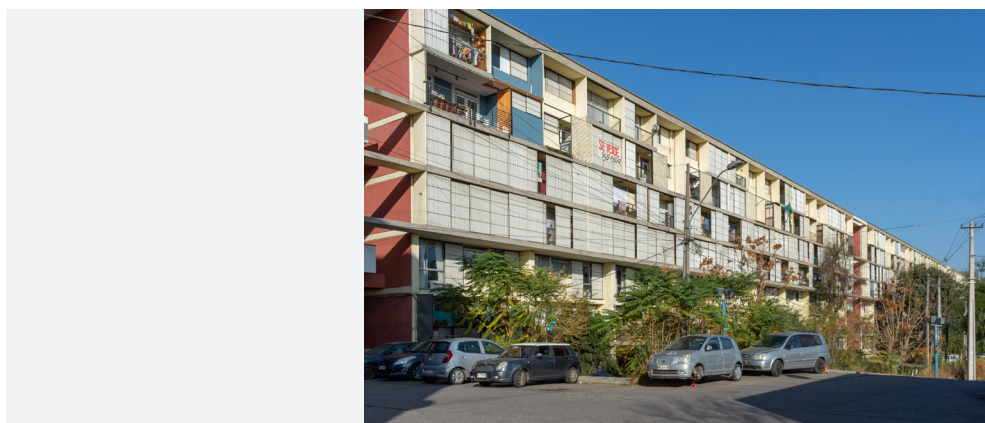


Figure 1. Unidad Vecinal Portales, in the Estacion Central municipality, Santiago, Chile. Author: Carlos Figueroa Rojas, 2023.

major dividend after the bygone saltpetre boom.³ Consequently, this boost in housing improvement set higher expectations in the second half of the century, which materialized through governmental social projects until Pinochet's dictatorship in 1973.

Social housing—a historical and never-ending Latin-American quandary—led the impetus and first efforts to apply Modern Movement strategies in the public realm. In Chile, the introduction of the Ministry of Housing (MINVU) in 1965 strengthened and enhanced what the Corporation of Housing (CORVI) had done since 1953. From this latter, emblematic projects arose whose significance has hardly been equalled to date and still resonate with people's collective memory. Among them are the Caja del Seguro Obrero (Tocopilla, 1941), Población Márquez (Valparaíso, 1949), Conjunto Habitacional Estadio (Arica, 1956), Unidad Vecinal Portales (Santiago, 1966) (Figure 01), just to name a few. Most of these housing projects were located near industrial hubs such as mining and ports—apart from Santiago, the country's capital. Therefore, with the Modern Movement shown as an effective investment around the world (and now in Chile), social housing projects continued playing a fundamental role in solving the spatial and health needs of the working class while largely contributing to ensuring Chile's economic and social goals.

Among the most symbolic projects attending to a series of public practices and policies on social housing matters is the Villa San Luis, located in the Las Condes municipality within the GSA. Built between 1971 and 1972,⁴ right before the coup d'état against Salvador Allende's government, this complex represents one of the last vestiges of high-standard social housing, particularly on spatial terms and location-wise. Housing projects such as the Villa San Luis offered decent interior spaces and easy access to goods and services within the metropolitan area, against the idea of an uncontrolled urban sprawl, as resisted by Modern Movement practices. Today, the Villa San Luis sits in what has become the most prestigious financial district in the country (and, arguably, South America). Its presence and that of its inhabitants have caused irritation and inconvenience (aesthetically and spatially)

for investors and upper-class neighbours. Despite several efforts to eradicate the Villa and its people, part of the complex obtained a Modern Heritage declaration in 2017 (Figure 02).

Consequently, once the military dictatorship took over power in 1973, the existing social housing policies radically changed through the following years. In 1978, a law on urban expansion in the GSA allowed the location of new social housing projects beyond the metropolitan ring. Gradually, the military government disengaged from developing and supervising any social housing project, which passed into the hands of private corporations strategically influenced by free-market speculation.⁵ As a result, the urban sprawl expanded, considerably increasing the home-to-work commuting time and, therefore, people's quality of life. Likewise, the municipalities and neighbourhoods in the new suburbs worsened the class struggle, which is now based on where (or how far) people live from downtown Santiago.

Another weakening factor in public policies—particularly on architecture—was the derogation of mandatory registration in the Institute of Architects of Chile in 1981. That overruling eliminated any institutional support the Institute offered and encouraged since 1942.⁶ Surprisingly, the end of Pinochet's dictatorship (1989) showed no improvement or change in that derogation or any social housing policies established in 1973, perpetuating the successful speculative model installed by private investors. For example, in Santiago, during the return to democracy, several social housing projects evidenced deficiencies in design, planning, and construction. The “Casas COPEVA” (1997) and “Casas Chubi” (2006) are among the most known failed projects. Negatively associated with social housing urban sprawl advocacy, particularly towards the GSA's periphery (Puente Alto municipality), the COPEVA units evidenced noticeable constructive flaws. Inhabitants had to install large plastic tarps on the buildings' facades every time it rained to avoid water leaking. After the impossibility of solving this issue, the whole complex was demolished. Likewise, the Chubi housing project (Penalolen municipality), which offered permanent houses to shantytown dwellers, experienced similar problems.⁷



Figure 2. Villa San Luis, in the Las Condes municipality, Santiago, Chile. Author: Alejandro Nuñez, 2015..

Both projects and other national cases increased stigmatization among people and neighbourhoods, worsening cracks in the urban fabric and society. Therefore, the people's discontent after the abandonment by (now) a democratic state—unable to respond adequately to their demands on housing and planning—did not take time to surface.

MPL, PENALOLEN, AND THE SELF-MANAGED HOUSING PROJECTS

The Movimiento Pobladores en Lucha (People in Fight Movement, MPL) was created from and for a territory that has permanently witnessed the struggle for accessing adequate housing within the GSA: the Penalolen municipality.⁸ Established in 2006, its beginning as a dwellers' collective coincides with the unfortunate "Casas Chubi" housing project offered to people living in Chile's largest and most significant shantytown in the last decades: the "Toma de Penalolen" (1999-2019). Besides, this collective already participated in other social movements during the dictatorship's times by joining popular committees before arriving at what is now known as MPL.⁹ The experience acquired through those initial years of fighting equipped them with an acute vision of where to direct their efforts, aiming at objectives that have materialized through time.

As mentioned, the MPL emerges and operates from the Penalolen municipality, prioritizing the quest for housing solutions for Penalolen dwellers within their territory. That quest opposes the ongoing urban sprawl planning in the GSA, which

originated under Pinochet's dictatorship and has continued under neoliberal governments since 1990. In order to avoid the undesired relocation of people towards GSA's outskirts—as the quick fix that governments have practised through the last five decades—the MPL has battled against real estate companies seeking in Penalolen a potential area for high-end development mainly due to its proximity to downtown Santiago. Therefore, the MPL's fight has opposed a housing market trend that considers essential the displacement of people towards the periphery and leaving the central areas suitable for high-end housing demands. Conversely, the MPL's bet aims to get just and factual housing solutions for Penalolen's people, wherein generations have dwelled, standing against current gentrification practices.

Today's real estate interest in the area was unthinkable before in Penalolen. Located on the west side of the GSA, Penalolen occupies the Andes Cordillera's foothill, which shapes its peculiar topography, looking above Santiago's valley. At first, its location qualified as "peripheral" due to its nearness to riverbeds and rural landscapes. Today, the Vina Cousino Macul (1856 to date) within Penalolen, one of the oldest vineyards in the centre valley, and other national parks over its west limit confirm its previous rural role in the city. However, the foothill condition set a turning point for the country's urban and housing growth policies. In 1993, Penalolen suffered one of the worst natural catastrophes in the last thirty years. An alluvium dragging mud and stones from the mountains devastated a large area of La Florida and Penalolen municipalities. Apart from the casualties, various areas were severely damaged, particularly affecting housing. After this disaster, new master plans were designed, and buffer zones were built in the event of another landslide. Today, Penalolen's improved risk measures have led to the construction of several privately funded housing, educational, and cult projects (e.g., University Adolfo Ibanez and the Bahá'í Temple of South America) (Figure 03).

If resilience had to have an address in Chile, this would undoubtedly be located in Penalolen. Throughout its 37 years of existence, the residents of this municipality have experienced the most distinctive problems in the history of this country: housing and natural disasters. Moreover, surviving unpredictable natural phenomena does not only recall the 1993 alluvium but also the permanent earthquakes that shake the country every 15 or 20 years. It is not fortuitous, therefore, that the MPL's demands have echoed in Penalolen's people. Born and raised in this popular district, the members of the MPL know better than anybody every one of its corners. That degree of awareness makes the MPL a collective deeply rooted within its territory, which differs from what the authorities in place have proposed regarding land-use planning and housing development. Besides, motivated by the common good, its members have achieved an enviable level of organization, comprising horizontal administration on decision-making and permanent fieldwork that embraces most of the neighbourhoods in need of housing within Penalolen. Its members have also resorted to professionals whenever

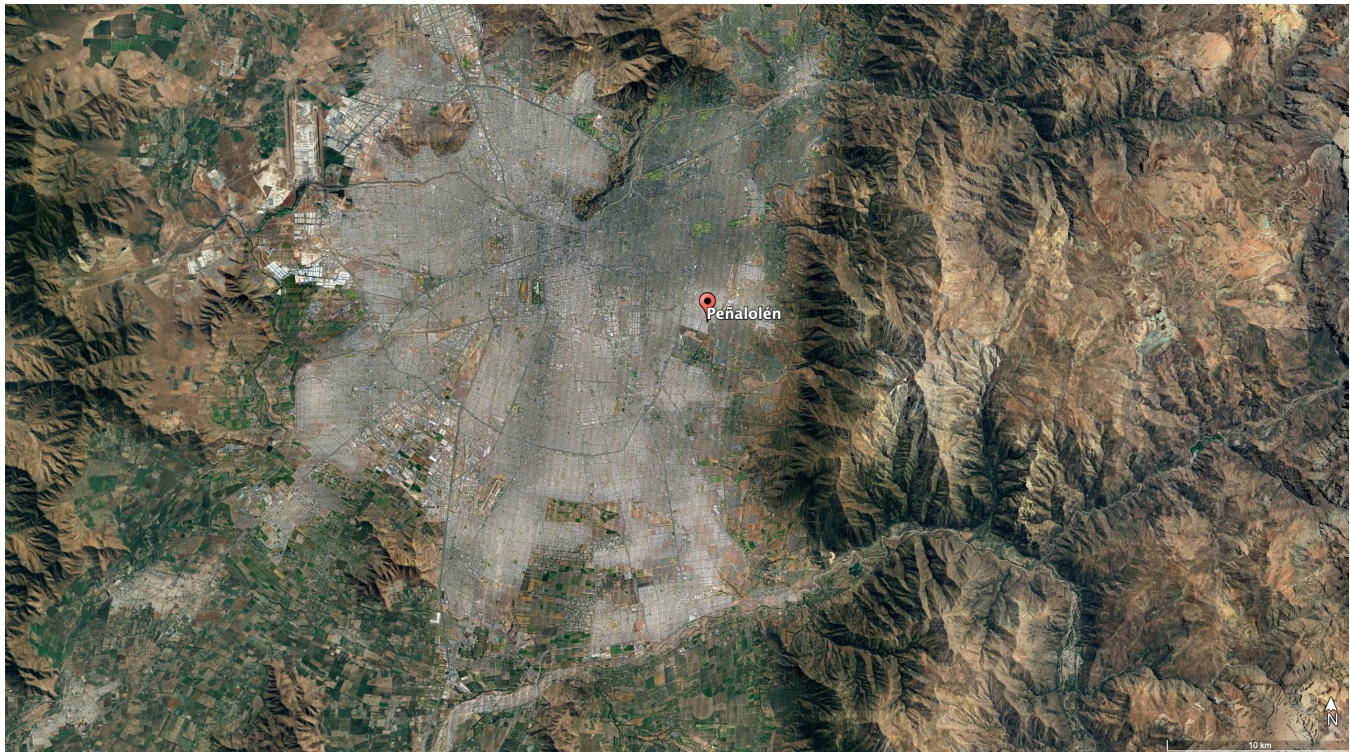


Figure 3. Peñalolén and its location in the Great Santiago Area. Google Earth 2022.

they require technical advice to fulfil their demands and self-manage projects efficiently. Technical support is necessary to submit housing design documentation to avoid failed attempts by authorities, which delays the process and the urgencies at stake. People's hopelessness in front of endless paperwork due to lack of professional backup and, most decisively, real estate investment priority in the land of Peñalolén have moved the MPL to take drastic measures: public manifestations. The MPL has deployed its members and dwellers on the streets of Santiago to demonstrate their housing demands publicly. Among the MPL's most emblematic manifestations are the one in the Government Palace (2007) and on the Mapocho River (2009), having Lautaro Guanica—one of MPL's founder members—as the main protagonist. Undoubtedly, the risk taken in these public manifestations has been significant. However, the MPL's housing projects would not have echoed in the authorities and the public sphere without them. Thus, in this case, the urgency of *Might* predominated over an ignored *Right* (Figure 04).

Invited by Lautaro in 2007, along with two colleagues,¹⁰ we had the privilege to cooperate with the pursuit of their objectives during the first years of the MPL, sharing our experience on social housing design. We were immediately captivated by their management of territorial information and potential sites to build the housing proposals, already assigned to numerous families. Our

task consisted of carrying out the initial architectural design at the municipality level, such as meeting with council architects and calculating the capacity of units for the sites proposed. In parallel, the MPL managed the property titles and acquisition of those selected (or detected) sites, assisted by other volunteering professionals from the legal disciplines. Overall, the main goal considered correct document submission to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy and, therefore, have a smoother dialogue with the Housing and Urbanism Service (SERVIU), the state institution in charge of housing and sites' subsidies approvals. Unquestionably, the support of volunteers in filling out required and specific documentation remains significant; however, the door-to-door fieldwork, public manifestations, informative assemblies, and essential community work have been fundamental in witnessing today's tangible outcomes. Above all, the women's role as MPL members has been crucial in keeping the hope alive in front of the several failed attempts to concretize the housing projects they have fought for. The women's work has been particularly vital in clearing up the projects' sites and safeguarding them (day and night) from state seizures. Furthermore, the women's role in the construction of units has been remarkable, making the MPL's objectives possible through their own hands. Undoubtedly, that confirms another way to city- and territory-making.



Figure 4. A MPL's public manifestation over the streets of Santiago. Author: Gonzalo Munoz-Vera, 2023.

In order to carry out their self-managed and collectively designed housing projects, the MPL created its own EGIS¹¹ (Real Estate and Social Management Entity), which legal organization allows them to channel internally (independent from third parties, especially private groups) the construction process of their projects.¹² Also, they created their own construction company (EMEPEELE Ltd.), avoiding the assistentialist role of the state and what private companies offer in the construction of governmentally subsidized housing. Those self-managing efforts sprang up from the dreadful experiences that they went through even before the collective's creation (e.g., Casas Chubi and COPEVA). Likewise, participants of this EGIS and construction company (EMEPEELE) are also members of the MPL and, above all, future dwellers of those housing units, who even work on the construction site and carry out clearing site tasks. When needing guidance and assistance over specific duties, the MPL's members reach out to volunteering professionals, defying the prevailing economic and real estate model. Thus, this collective redefines the EGIS concept with that coined by them as the EaGIS: Real Estate and Social Self-Management Entity.

By the time of our involvement as volunteering architects, the MPL had six housing proposals and sites still in the process of acquisition. To date, they have over 20 proposals as well as possible sites. Of the projects we participated in, three have been built and already handed into their proprietors: the MPL1 (2013), MPL3 (2019), and MPL2 (2021). The design process mainly considered what the future dwellers wanted and understood as an adequate home ("hogar digno"). In this particular endeavour, the role of the architect consisted of carefully listening to those future dwellers in order to concretize the wishes of owning property within their territory. Equally important was the dialogue with the MPL members, particularly as inhabitants of the same city (Santiago) and personally experienced in housing matters, which eased having productive encounters. Besides, those former housing project benchmarks from the 50s and 60s in Chile set the tone for a shared conversation regarding architecture and public space. Popular among the future dwellers' referents were the "1010/1020 Blocks" apartment buildings built in the 70s under the CORVI administration, still visible in some of Santiago's neighbourhoods. To emulate those referents, the MPL1 Project (2013) considered 32 apartment units of 61m² in housing blocks of four stories, each of them organized over a site of 1739m². The MPL3 Project (2019) included 32 apartments of 58m² organized in one housing block of four stories on a site of 2400m² (Figure 05). Finally, the MPL2 Project (2021) consisted of 120 apartments of 57m² in one housing block of two stories on a site of 6000m².¹³ The sites where the MPL's projects are located allow constructions of such magnitude that simultaneously belong to Penalolén's urban fabric. This latter confers added value to the new housing units and the municipality by contributing to quality projects within their territory and for their people. Apart from reinforcing the sense of belonging in their historical surroundings, the inhabitants of the MPL's housing projects count

on shared equipment (e.g., gardens, meeting rooms, parking lots) in order to strengthen the sense of community.¹⁴

CONCLUSIVE NOTES

In this paper, the topics related to the urgency to develop consistent, dignified, and just housing policies demonstrate the significance of the territory and, above all, those who inhabit it as a sine qua non to consolidate a harmonious coexistence between place and community. Throughout 17 uninterrupted years, the demands undertaken by the MPL collective have considered the Penalolén inhabitants' participation as fundamental in housing design, as well as the sense of belonging to a land where they have dwelled through several generations. At first glance, those seem logical demands when proposing design and location strategies for social housing projects; however, the continuous public manifestations claiming authorities' support keep demonstrating the opposite.

Undoubtedly, the territory becomes a "problem" whenever inhabitants decide where they want to keep living. Besides, as the city grows, land value around downtown rises. Therefore, real estate strategies target a user capable of affording the cost of housing and what it means to live in an area of now higher value. Consequently, urban and territorial planning policy, along with prevailing real estate strategies, block the efforts to achieve a better participatory role when addressing housing solutions and localization. Moreover, while the MPL's initiatives have been fruitful (similar to the existing housing units of the Villa San Luis in Las Condes), those proposals still require years of sacrifice and perseverance to survive the current real-estate scenario. Unfortunately, housing is and has been an urgent topic that demands here-and-now answers. This unsolved puzzle has pushed families towards the city suburbs in the several new areas approved for housing projects. Undoubtedly, the urgency for accepting far-off locations weakens the work of groups such as the MPL and hinders conscious city development and territorial understanding. In addition, unclear government policies in constant elaboration with private real-estate agents—that claim to the state for a redemptive (or messianic) role to clean up their image—make the housing problem a laboratory of empty ideas, where aesthetics predominates over urgent matters of place and the history of its inhabitants.

There is no doubt that the MPL members would disapprove of a national motto alluding to the *Might* imposition if the *Right* does not suffice to reach an agreement. Indeed, they would favour having a motto similar to the one heard nowadays on the streets: "By Right's Might." Nonetheless, having no intention of advocating violence, the needs and priorities for adequate and fair access to housing must involve taking other measures, such as the public demonstrations that this group constantly organizes. Likewise, their struggle and results achieved throughout the years have proved to be a valuable and unique lesson, chimerical in schools of architecture and urbanism. Undeniably, this sets

an example and perhaps a paradoxical vestige on city-making in vulnerable territories through resilient inhabitants.

ENDNOTES

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7. Eduardo Garín, "'La Larga Tarea de Reorganizar las Comunidades de Base.' El Movimiento de Pobladores de Santiago entre Dictadura Cívico-Militar y Democracia Neoliberal 1982-1999," *Palimpsesto* 8, no. 13 (1 February 2018): 99.
8. The Santiago province includes 32 municipalities. Penalolén is one of them since 1984.
9. Romina Guzmán et al., *Movimiento de Pobladores en Lucha. A Tomarse Peñalolén para Conquistar la Ciudad*, 1st ed., Cuadernos SUR (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones SUR, 2009), 10.
10. PhD architect Claudio Pulgar and architect Matias Mlynarz.
11. The main tasks of an EGIS are to organize families and make the necessary arrangements to obtain their housing. The EGIS has specific responsibilities at the various stages of the construction and purchasing of housing projects, as well as in the development of a social empowerment plan for group members. The SERVIU is responsible for the construction's technical inspection and pays fees to the EGIS for its services according to the regulatory values. Source: serviu.cl
12. Charlotte Mathivet and Claudio Pulgar, "El Movimiento de Pobladores en Lucha: los Habitantes Construyen un Lugar para Vivir en Santiago de Chile," in *Ciudades para Tod@s: por el Derecho a la Ciudad, Propuestas y Experiencias*, Segunda edición (Santiago de Chile: Habitat International Coalition, 2011), 218.
13. Guzmán et al., *Movimiento de Pobladores en Lucha. A Tomarse Peñalolén para Conquistar la Ciudad*, 21.
14. Mathivet and Pulgar, "El Movimiento de Pobladores en Lucha: los Habitantes Construyen un Lugar para Vivir en Santiago de Chile," 221.



Figure 5. MPL3 apartment buildings (2019). Architect: Matias Mlynarz. Author: Gonzalo Muñoz-Vera (2023)