A New Vision for Barrio Olímpico: Affordable Housing in Southern Buenos Aires

Submitted By: Center of Urban Economic Studies at National University of San Martin



Organization Profile

Organization Name: South Buenos Aires Corporation

Organization Type: University and research institution

Website: https://buenosaires.gob.ar/gcaba_historico/desarrollo-humano-y-habitat/corporacion-buenos-aires-sur

Practice Details

Country(ies): Argentina

City(ies): Buenos Aires

Start Year: 2022

Ongoing: Yes

End Year: N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:

- Housing Affordability & Financing
- Housing, Land & Spatial Planning
- Housing Policy, Legislation & Governance

Relevant SDGs:



UN-HABITAT

Problem & Context

Barrio Olímpico was originally built as the housing infrastructure for the 2018 Youth Olympic Games, under the idea of being later developed as a housing project for families in the city of Buenos AIres. Despite high-quality infrastructure, post-event development faced key challenges: low real estate demand, restrictive mortgage access, limited services, and fragmented governance. The southern area of Buenos Aires suffers from historical spatial and socio-economic inequalities. Without a clear post-event strategy, the neighborhood risked becoming underutilized and disconnected. A comprehensive roadmap was needed to activate public land, integrate housing with services, and promote inclusive growth.

Solution Developed

The project, led by the CEEU at UNSAM and the South Buenos Aires Corporation, proposed a strategic vision to transform Barrio Olímpico into a complete and inclusive urban area in order to foster its development. This vision went beyond providing housing solutions to conceive the neighborhood as a new metropolitan hub, aligning housing, mobility, social infrastructure, and public space with long-term economic sustainability. A central component was the application of urban economics to guide development: identifying land value appreciation, designing transparent public land auctions, and ensuring that revenues are reinvested in the neighborhood to finance new housing, infrastructure, and green spaces. This land value capture approach creates a virtuous cycle where public investments enhance community assets while sustaining fiscal resources. Through participatory planning and evidence-based research, the strategy aimed to unlock vacant land, enhance affordable housing supply, improve connectivity, and foster social cohesion. An innovative Special Projects Unit was also proposed to ensure coordinated governance, turning the project into a replicable model of post-megaevent planning.

Implementation

The methodology was structured in successive phases that built upon one another in an incremental way. It began with a diagnostic stage based on quantitative data analysis and spatial mapping, followed by fieldwork, interviews, and surveys that incorporated local knowledge and resident perspectives. These findings informed the design of a strategic vision organized around five pillars—housing, mobility, green space, social infrastructure, and economic development—while also defining an urban economics strategy that links land value appreciation, public land auctions -which already led to the sell to develop of 27 new vacant lots-, and reinvestment mechanisms. The final phase consolidated this vision into a roadmap where each cycle of land management and reinvestment generates the resources to expand affordable housing, improve infrastructure, and enhance public space. This approach not only ensures continuity and sustainability but also progressively improves access and quality of housing. The process engaged city agencies, NGOs, and community organizations alongside local residents, supported by public funding and academic expertise.

Enablers & Obstacles

Key enablers included strong institutional leadership, academic support, and active stakeholder engagement. The availability of public land and pre-existing infrastructure, combined with the political momentum of the 2018 Youth Olympic Games, provided a unique opportunity to catalyze development. BO, located in the historically underserved southern area of BsAs, is characterized by lower population density but larger household size, a young demographic, and high unemployment—factors that made strategic intervention essential. Obstacles such as economic instability, limited credit access, and institutional fragmentation were addressed through participatory planning, stakeholder mapping, and the design of an incremental urban economics strategy, including land auctions and reinvestment mechanisms supported by a proposed governance unit.

Results & Impact

The project created a strategic plan to guide future investments and interventions in Barrio Olímpico. It targeted over 200 vacant plots for development -27 of which have since the project begun been sold in auctions-, proposed enhanced service access, and addressed infrastructure maintenance. Approximately 1,200 households currently benefit, with potential for more than 500. A key innovation was the application of urban economic tools to assess land value appreciation and inform land management strategies. The plan proposes using public auctions to allocate undeveloped plots and reinvesting the proceeds directly into neighborhood improvements — such as new social infrastructure, green spaces, and mobility enhancements — ensuring that value generated remains within the community. This circular model of land value capture strengthens local development and fiscal sustainability. The project has reshaped urban planning conversations in Buenos Aires and serves as a model for leveraging mega-event legacies toward inclusive, equitable urban regeneration.

Replication & Scale Up

The methodology can be adapted to other underused urban areas with public land. Key success factors include strong coordination, participatory methods, and adaptable financing tools.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice has been fully adopted into formal policy frameworks and legislation, and is being implemented at scale with institutional support.

One of the main outcomes has been the implementation of a phased land auction system where lots are publicly tendered online under transparent rules. This mechanism, grounded in the urban economics strategy defined in the plan, allows for land value capture through auction revenues, which are reinvested into the neighborhood to expand affordable housing, improve infrastructure, and strengthen services. The ongoing execution of land auctions demonstrates

institutional uptake of the practice, embedding it into governance frameworks and ensuring continuity of investment in the neighborhood.

Lessons & Takeaways

The practice demonstrated the value of linking land management with reinvestment, showing how urban economics can sustain affordable housing and infrastructure. However, earlier integration of maintenance plans and more accessible financing instruments would have strengthened outcomes, as well as clearer transition strategies after the megaevent. For replication, key factors include phased implementation, strong inter-agency coordination, and ensuring that land value capture directly benefits the community.