

# FRAGMENTACIÓN (SUB) URBANA Y DIFERENCIAS SOCIALES: URBANIZACIONES CERRADAS Y SU ROL EN LA PROMOCIÓN SUBURBANOS EN CHACRAS DE CORIA (MENDOZA, ARGENTINA)\*

Sonia Roitman<sup>α</sup>

## Resumen

Este artículo explora las transformaciones geográficas, económicas y espaciales que tienen lugar en las zonas residenciales periféricas como resultado de la construcción de comunidades cerradas. Este último hecho ha generado fragmentación a nivel (sub) urbano, una serie de cambios en el uso del suelo y el surgimiento de desigualdades espaciales. Fundada en una serie de análisis de datos primarios y secundarios, la presente investigación ofrece evidencias que avalan este argumento a través del seguimiento de las transformaciones que están teniendo lugar en Chacras de Coria, una zona

# SPLINTERING (SUB) URBANISM AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCES: GATED COMMUNITIES AS THE DRIVER FOR SUBURBAN CHANGE IN CHACRAS DE CORIA (MENDOZA, ARGENTINA)\*

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## Abstract

*This article analyses the geographical, economic and spatial transformations in suburbia as a consequence of the arrival of gated communities. The latter are fostering splintering (sub) urbanism, changes in land use and increasing spatial and social inequalities. The article provides evidence supporting this argument through the examination of the transformations occurring in Chacras de Coria, a suburb in the Metropolitan Area of Mendoza (MAM), Argentina. The analysis is based on primary and secondary data.*

residencial periférica ubicada en el Área Metropolitana de Mendoza (MAM), Argentina.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** ZONA RESIDENCIAL PERIFÉRICA, URBANIZACIONES CERRADAS, TRANSFORMACIONES URBANAS, DIFERENCIAS SOCIALES, DESIGUALDAD ESPACIAL Y SOCIAL.

**KEY WORDS:** SUBURBIA, GATED COMMUNITIES, URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS, SOCIAL DIFFERENCES, SPATIAL AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

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## Introduction

Most cities in the Global South continue to expand. Urban sprawl is a consequence of population growth and urban policies but also of choices made by citizens or simply opportunities related to housing provision. For some citizens, a house in the periphery seems to be the only option because of a low supply of housing in central areas and high prices of housing and land. For other families, living in the suburbs in gated or non-gated neighborhoods provides the opportunity of having more green space, a larger house, away from the noise and hustle of the city center and improved personal security (although the latter is not always the case). Chacras de Coria is a suburb of the Metropolitan Area of Mendoza, Argentina. It has experienced fast growth in the last twenty years mainly as a consequence of the development of gated communities in the area. The population in Chacras increased from over 5,000 residents in 1991 to over 12,000 residents in 2010<sup>1</sup>.

The article argues that gated communities have been the driver for suburban change producing geographical, economic and social transformations. These transformations have led to increased social and spatial inequality in suburbia,

reproducing ‘splintering (sub) urbanism’. This article contributes to the discussion on the consequences of gated communities, in particular in the case of secondary cities in Argentina. These areas have received little research attention. Most analyses of gated communities have focused on large metropolitan areas (mostly country capitals), like Buenos Aires (Svampa, 2001; Vidal Koppmann, 2014), São Paulo (Caldeira, 2000), Santiago de Chile (Sabatini & Cáceres, 2004), and Mexico City (Safa, 2002). This research is a pioneer study of the transformations and fast growth of Chacras de Coria due to real estate development over the last two decades.

The empirical evidence for this article is primary and secondary data. The latter is drawn from a review of literature, reports and newspaper articles from the local press. Primary data has been gathered through three main research methods: an on-line survey, informal conversations with local residents and observations of everyday practices and real estate activities in suburbia. The on-line survey was conducted using the Survey-Monkey website. An open invitation to Chacras de Coria residents was sent by email and shared using the snowballing technique. It was also shared publicly using Facebook<sup>2</sup>. Although there are limitations when conducting an on-line survey, as there is no

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1 DEIE website (Dirección de Estadísticas e Investigaciones Económicas), Gobierno de Mendoza, <http://www.deie.mendoza.gov.ar>.

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2 The author shared the survey link on her Facebook page and invited all her contacts to share it with their contacts.

universal access to the tool, this type of invite and sharing allows for a degree of open access. The on-line survey was open for two weeks in May 2016 and got 33 anonymous responses from Chacras de Coria residents (both female and male, older than 18 years old). The informal conversations with residents of Chacras de Coria were conducted over the last five years in public and private places such as local shops, the local market and private houses. As informal conversations, they were not recorded and notes were taken afterwards. Hence, data from those conversations is used as background information and not presented as quotes. The author has observed the urban transformations that have occurred in this suburb over the last 20 years and the changes in everyday practices of local residents.

The article is divided into six sections including this Introduction. Section 2 discusses three analytical dimensions for the study of suburbia: geographical, economic and social changes. These dimensions are examined for Argentina's suburbia in Section 3, focusing on the development of gated communities. The next two sections examine the case study: Section 4 sets the context for where Chacras is located through the discussion of the growth of Luján de Cuyo (the municipality where

Chacras de Coria is located). Section 5 analyses the geographical, economic and social changes in Chacras as a consequence of the arrival of gated communities. Finally, the conclusion reinforces the trends that appear in this case study and identifies some of the challenges of suburban growth.

## Features of suburbia

The development of suburbia in the Anglo-American countries<sup>3</sup> responded to the need to escape from the problems of the city (noise, pollution and overcrowding) and the discomfort of the middle class with mixed use and mixed class areas in central areas of the city (Fishman, 2003). In the 1950s and 1960s, large extensions of land at the edge of cities were sold for private development as a mechanism to reactivate the economy and encourage economic growth (Herzog, 2015).

There was a clear need to distinguish suburbs from central areas of the city, reinforcing their advantages and positive attributes. Suburbs were associated with a bucolic lifestyle and with more 'contact with nature' (Fishman, 2003). Privacy, exclusivity,

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3 Some authors like Teaford (2011) refer to England, Canada, United States and Australia when explaining the development of suburbia. However, most urban planners in Australia think that Australian suburbs present a different evolution than US suburbia.

security and a greener lifestyle were the main aspects sought in suburbia.

The wealthiest families could retreat to summer villas in semi-rural settings located outside the city: 'Suburbia was the ideal retreat for the middle-class family, a bourgeois utopia of owner-occupied detached homes with accompanying gardens' (Teaford, 2011, p. 16). Summer villas were later converted into permanent residences and the wealthy groups were joined by middle-class families (Teaford, 2011).

Residential use was the main land use in suburbia. However, the new population living outside the city required services and shopping spaces near their homes. New shopping centers were built, encouraged by the availability of land outside the city that provided easy access by private transport and parking for the new customers. Retailing in the suburbs became more convenient as suburban shopping centers had store anchors and a wide variety of shops to satisfy consumers' needs in one single location. In addition to residential and retail uses, the need for more space for offices and services in central areas led to the relocation of centrally located industries to industrial parks in the suburbs.

This historical evolution of suburbs in the Anglo-American context has contributed to a different suburbia today. The understanding of how suburbia is developing requires the examination of the interrelation between geographic, economic and social aspects (Walker, 1981)<sup>4</sup>. From a geographic view, three main features need to be considered: spatial differentiation, decentralization of activities and changes in the urban landscape. Spatial differentiation is based on land use differentiation (residential, commercial, industrial, and recreational uses). In suburbia, residential uses dominate and this use is usually not mixed with others.

The second geographic feature is a decentralization of activities, which becomes possible due to good transportation and the dispersal of employment. With the development of telecommunications, proximity to the city center becomes less important for some activities. Some new office space or 'suburban clusters' (Fishman, 2003) are built at the edge of cities. New services and infrastructure are also provided. The third geographic feature is the changes in the urban landscape as a consequence of capitalist development, higher consumption and the influence of globalization that makes the design of housing more similar or uniform.

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4 This analysis refers to the suburbia in the USA, but, as this article argues, it can also be applied to the analysis of Argentine suburbs.

The economic aspects of the analysis of suburbia are mainly related to land speculation and the impact on land use changes to maximize profits. There is an accelerated process of transforming rural land into urban land when the residential use becomes the most profitable use for landowners and private developers. The private sector plays a central role in the production of suburbia, which is supported by the local government granting approval for land use change.

Finally, the examination of the particular social aspects of suburbia is also critical since its development is positively linked to the idea of social homogeneity, success, high status and distinction from other social groups and the predominance of white-middle and upper-class families. These families have always had a strong weight in the social structure of the city: '[a] group with the greatest cultural prestige and range of choices whose characteristic domestic typology eventually dominates the rest of the middle class and hence the metropolis itself' (Fishman, 2003, p. 4). This group also has significant political power and it is likely that their members occupy high-level government positions. Their privileged position helps to achieve their demands and their area of residence becomes a well-served suburb: services and infrastructure are provided in these suburbs

as a result of a partnership between private and public sectors. The latter would provide what the former is not able to supply due to a lack of profitable benefits for developers and private companies. Shopping centers are built in these suburbs so upper-middle class residents can avoid travelling to the city center for shopping and recreation. Everyday life in these suburbs depends on access to a private automobile. There is usually poor provision of public transport because these residents would prefer private than public transportation as it is more comfortable and they can also avoid contact with other social groups. Thus the geographic and economic changes related to the decentralization of activities and the provision of new services and infrastructure also create social changes. Social and spatial inequalities become more visible and the access to these services and infrastructure is linked to class.

These features of suburbia have been developed to analyze the Anglo-American suburbia. However, this paper argues that, even when there are several differences, these dimensions can be used to study the growth and transformation of suburbia in Argentina. Herzog mentions that there has been 'a global diffusion of the American suburban model' creating 'global suburbs', or suburbs that copy the US model and also repeat 'many of the errors of US

suburbs<sup>5</sup>. The next section examines the case of Argentina to provide the context for the discussion on the growth of Chacras de Coria.

## Suburban growth and gated communities in Argentina

The growth and development of suburbia in Argentina presents similarities and differences with the situation in the Anglo-American context. Historically Argentine suburbs presented two types of morphology: areas for residential use, mainly occupied by poor groups, and areas for agricultural use with limited residential use for affluent groups.

In the first type, areas located outside the city grew as a consequence of high land prices in central locations that forced poor families to settle in the outskirts of the city. These areas grew either informally in the form of slums or squatter settlements accommodating poor migrants from rural areas or other provinces, or through the construction of social housing estates accommodating poor families. Citizens moved to these areas looking

for a piece of land where they could get their own house subsidized by the public sector or where they could build their houses on their own with the help of relatives and friends. These areas did not have adequate services and infrastructure. The landscape was not attractive and the location was usually prone to natural disasters (Gutiérrez, 2004; Nuñez, 2012). Thus, this type of suburban morphology is different from the typical suburban development in the U.S.

The second type of suburban morphology referred to suburban areas that had a combination of uses: rural activities and residential use, mainly used as secondary houses for weekends or holiday houses for upper and upper-middle income groups. These suburbs were located in what would be called today the 'peri-urban interface'. A quiet, beautiful and green landscape surrounded by nature. Residents were seeking a quiet and natural environment, away from city hustle. This second type of suburban morphology was similar to suburbia in the Anglo-American context, with the additional element of the rural activities. However, in contrast to the situation in the latter, in Argentina these areas had poor provision of services and infrastructure. This was not only accepted but also

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5 Herzog, 2015, p. 2; Fishman (2003, p. 2) has also referred to 'global suburbs' analyzing 'American-style middle-class suburbs at the edge of the megacities of the developing world'. Fishman (2003, p. 6) uses the concept of 'global suburbs' because 'they reproduce ... the relations of economic and cultural domination that characterize the global economy as a whole'.

valued as a characteristic of the 'rural lifestyle', even if it was in suburbia. Gated communities built in Argentina in the early 1970s were located in this peri-urban interface<sup>6</sup>.

These two types of urban sprawl morphology were considered as different semantically in social imaginary and in the literature. There were different concepts used to refer to each of them. The same territory located at the edge of the city center was (and still is) referred to as a 'suburb' when their residents were mainly upper- and upper-middle income families, and 'periphery' when their residents were mainly lower-income families. Although the two concepts relate to particular and different values, they both refer to the same geographic location. Suburb is linked to affluence and has a positive connotation. Periphery is associated with marginalization, exclusion and poverty and carries a negative connotation.

However, the distinction between these two types of urban sprawl changed with the development of gated communities in Buenos Aires in the 1990s as a consequence of the improvement of motorways, the influence of foreign direct investment in real estate, the state withdrawal from the provision of services, high crime rates, fear of crime

and increasing social inequalities (Svampa, 2001; Thuillier, 2005). This change also became visible later in other Argentine cities like Córdoba, Rosario, and Mendoza<sup>7</sup>.

Gated communities appeared as a new suburban element imitating the 'American way of life' (Thuillier, 2005). Their development created three main changes, which can be analyzed based on the three key dimensions proposed by Walker, as already mentioned: geographical, economic and social changes.

The geographical transformations refer mainly to the change of land use from rural/agricultural to residential (spatial differentiation as referred by Walker). This was the first change and is still the most important change. Additionally, the new population who moved to these new residential areas encouraged the decentralization of activities (the second change mentioned by Walker) and the location of new land uses in the periphery. New service and commercial areas were built, including office developments and also new (or expanded) industrial parks. This can be seen in the growth of Pilar (a municipality of the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires) with the construction of new shopping centers, schools, hotels, office space and the

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6 The construction of gated communities for weekend residential use in Buenos Aires started in the 1970s. However, there were a few earlier exceptions like Tortugas Country Club developed in the 1930s. For more on this see Svampa, 2001 and Thuillier, 2005.

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7 For Córdoba see Valdés, 1999; for Rosario see Bragos, Mateos & Pontoni, 2002; for Mendoza see Roitman, 2005.

expansion of the industrial park (Roitman and Phelps, 2011). This municipality received new investments for about USD \$650 million<sup>8</sup>. The landscape transformation (the third geographical change mentioned by Walker) can be also identified in the changes that occurred in the Argentine suburbia. The development of gated communities produced a highly visible transformation in the typology of housing and the amenities provided in suburbia. These geographical changes have been similar to the changes examined by Walker (1981) in the US.

The geographical changes brought a new phenomenon to the suburbs: 'splintering urbanism' (Graham and Marvin, 2001), or as argued in this article, 'splintering (sub) urbanism', creating 'premium networked spaces' (Graham and Marvin, 2001). The new commercial, educational and recreational facilities are not well distributed in suburbia. They are highly concentrated close to gated communities, leaving behind areas with great deficiencies in the provision of services and infrastructure. In Pilar, for example, the residents of gated communities coexist with other residents who live in poor neighborhoods with inadequate street lighting, inadequate public transport infrastructure, high infant mortality and high school drop-out

(Roitman and Phelps, 2011). The development of Pilar as a consequence of the arrival of gated communities did not benefit the poor population of that municipality as it only improved the services and infrastructure offered in the areas close to and within the gated communities and not in the 'open' residential areas. This increased spatial and social inequalities in suburbia.

The development of gated communities also created economic changes in the periphery through land speculation processes as a consequence of the change of land use from rural to urban residential use. Real estate activities became highly profitable, while rural revenues decreased (Vidal Koppman, 2014). Private developers (supported by local governments) were the main actor responsible for this change. Additionally, in some cases the new services established in the periphery might have contributed to the local economy of the area. However, there is not much research evidence on this.

Finally, social changes were also highly significant in the periphery with the arrival of new residents belonging to upper and middle-upper income families, who contrasted with the 'old residents' (mainly lower-income families). Gated community residents looked for permanent houses located

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8 This was about 12% of the total investment received in the province of Buenos Aires in the early 2000s (Vidal Koppman, 2014, p. 276).

outside the central areas of the city, where they could live a more relaxed lifestyle, surrounded by green areas and nature, escaping from 'city life'. They also sought more security to appease their fear of crime and in particular, a more secure environment for children to be able to play safely in the streets, as their parents used to do in the past. The newcomers also wanted to get a sense of community in the new house and neighborhood. Social distinction and the need for a higher social status also became important factors to explain the increasing demand for gated communities<sup>9</sup>. With increasing income inequalities in suburbia, gated community residents tried to avoid contact with situations of poverty and hence with some or most of the 'old residents'.

The new coexistence of polarized social groups in the same territory has been the main social transformation in Argentina. This has created a change in the scale of segregation from an old segregation based on different social groups located in different areas of the city (center-periphery or north-south) to a reduced scale of segregation (Sabatini and Cáceres, 2004). Polarized groups are now living close to each other, but with non-existent or limited relationships between them. The social composition of suburbia has changed. However, this is one of the main differences with the Anglo-American

suburbia, which is homogeneous in terms of social class (although it is heterogeneous in relation to ethnicity). In the case of Argentina, as in most other Latin American countries, the arrival of gated communities at the periphery has led to a social transformation with more heterogeneity, but also stronger segregation processes and more visible spatial and social inequalities (Roitman & Giglio, 2010).

Gated communities have been the main driver of suburban growth in many Argentine cities. In the case of Pilar, gated communities increased from 20 in the 1980s to more than 100 in early 2000s (Roitman & Phelps, 2011), doubling the population from 144,670 residents in 1991 to 299,077 in 2010<sup>10</sup>. This has also been the case in Chacras de Coria, a district in the municipality of Luján de Cuyo in the Metropolitan Area of Mendoza.

## Luján de Cuyo and Chacras de Coria: setting the context

Luján de Cuyo is one of the six municipalities that form the Metropolitan Area of Mendoza (MAM). In 2010, it had 119,888 residents, which represented a 15% population increase since 2001 (DEIE, s.f.).

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9 For a detailed analysis of the reasons behind choosing to live in gated communities in Argentina, see Roitman (2010).

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10 INDEC website (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, República Argentina), <http://www.indec.gov.ar>.

Luján de Cuyo is the municipality with the highest population growth in MAM. Luján's population accounts for 10% of the total population of MAM.

Until 1960 the rural population exceeded the urban population (61%) in this municipality but since 1970 the urban population has become dominant (53% in 1970, 57% in 1980, 77% in 1991, 77% in 2001 and 79% in 2010) (Álvarez, Cortellezzi & Karake, 1996)<sup>11</sup>. In 1991, 3% of the population lived in informal settlements or slums in Luján de Cuyo (Álvarez et al., 1996). The absolute number of houses in informal settlements has decreased from 2001 to 2010, but the percentage has remained stable<sup>12</sup>. The main urban centers in Luján are: Ciudad (which is the capital district of the municipality) with 27,594 residents in 2010 (23% of the municipal population), Carrodilla with 23,886 (20%), Perdriel with 13,687 (11%) and Chacras de Coria with 12,428 (10%)<sup>13</sup>.

Luján de Cuyo is one of the largest municipalities of MAM. It occupies 4,847 square kilometers (Álvarez et al., 1996). Most of the territory is rural occupied by part of Los Andes Mountains. The agricultural use, along with the industrial and residential uses, has dominated this municipality. Vine growing is one of the most important

agricultural activities. Luján de Cuyo is considered as the area with the best climatic conditions and soil for vine growing in the province. Mendoza province is the first producer of wine in Argentina, producing around 75% of the national production. In the early 1990s there were 99 wineries in Luján de Cuyo (Álvarez et al., 1996), whereas now there are 131 wineries -16 of them located in Chacras de Coria- (DEIE, s.f.). Vineyards and the mountains constitute typical elements of the landscape of this municipality (Figure 1).

The urban area of MAM expanded to the South (Luján de Cuyo and Maipú) in the mid-1970s due to the existence of affordable urban land. Some middle-class neighborhoods for union workers were built in suburbs located to the north of Chacras de Coria. New weekend houses were built in Chacras over that time and this suburb became part of the urban sprawl. The main urban area of MAM took over Chacras de Coria creating an urban continuum in the 1970s<sup>14</sup>. Land prices in the north of Luján de Cuyo (including Chacras de Coria) started to increase as a result of higher demand since the 1970s (Álvarez et al., 1996). In 1991, Luján was the municipality with the largest number of construction permits in MAM (Gray de Cerdán, 2005).

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11 DEIE website <http://www.deie.mendoza.gov.ar>.

12 DEIE website <http://www.deie.mendoza.gov.ar>.

13 DEIE website <http://www.deie.mendoza.gov.ar>.

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14 In 1970, MAM occupied 5,843 hectares. In 1991 the urban sprawl had more than duplicated to 13,517 hectares and 10 years later there was an 81% increase to 24,531 hectares (Gudiño & Reyes, 2005).

FIGURE 1: TYPICAL LANDSCAPE OF LUJÁN DE CUYO



Source: author.

Chacras de Coria, one of the districts of Luján de Cuyo, is located in the northern area of the municipality, 16 kilometers away from Mendoza city center. It has experienced the fastest growth because of a beautiful landscape, lower temperatures than in the city center (cooler in summer time) and good transport infrastructure. It is possible to access the city center via two motorways: 'Acceso Sur', built in 1977, which is part of the National Motorway 40 that ties Argentina from north to south, and connects the northern and southern areas of MAM; and 'Corredor del Oeste', built in the early 2000s, going across the western side of MAM.

## Chacras de Coria: a mixed suburb in transformation

The district of Chacras de Coria has experienced strong transformation over the last 20 years. Following the three main analytical dimensions suggested by Walker, as previously elaborated, this section examines the geographic, economic and social changes that occurred in this suburb of MAM.

### GEOGRAPHIC CHANGES

The first geographic transformation has been the spatial differentiation produced as a consequence of the land use change. In the on-line survey conducted with residents of Chacras de Coria, 65% of respondents considered the change from rural to urban land use as the main change in the suburb over the last 20 years. The construction of new neighborhoods (new residential use) was selected as the second most important change (55% of respondents)<sup>15</sup>. Before the 1990s, Chacras de Coria was a traditional small suburb for rural and weekend houses. Local wineries' employees occupied these small and modest rural houses. Upper-middle class families who lived in the city center or other municipalities closer to the city center of Mendoza owned rural and small weekend houses

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15 This question allowed for up to two answers.

with only the basic amenities for a rural lifestyle away from the noise and hectic working days in Mendoza.

Services and infrastructure were precarious in this area. Not all houses had sewerage but they all had access to drinking water and electricity. Local residents would do their shopping in the city center since there were only a handful of small local shops to satisfy basic needs (a bakery, a small convenience store, a warehouse, and so on). Chacras de Coria has a main square, with a local church, some stores and government buildings (like a small public library). This has always been the center of 'Chacras', as commonly known.

In the early 1990s, Chacras de Coria had slowly started to change. It was a heterogeneous suburb with mixed land use and different levels of services and amenities. Services of water, electricity, gas and public transport were lacking or insufficient for the existing population. There were abandoned warehouses and wineries and a large number of empty lots (Álvarez et al, 1996). With the improvement of transport infrastructure, the extension of public transport to Chacras de Coria and the economic crisis that made it difficult for some families to keep two houses (one in the center and one in the suburbs), some families moved to Chacras de Coria as the permanent residential location.

At the end of the 1990s, when the first gated communities were built, living in Chacras de Coria became an attractive option for some families. They would have a house with green space, quietness, a beautiful landscape and nice climate (very different from the hot summer days in Mendoza city center), in addition to security. One of the survey respondents commented: *'We liked the quiet and rural lifestyle [and] a very good microclimate'*. Another resident mentioned: *'It is an area where you could have a larger house'*, while a third resident emphasized: *'a quiet place, with a lot of nature around'*.

Most survey respondents (85%) said they had moved to Chacras over the last 20 years. They chose to live there because of the beauty of the landscape (70% of respondents) and the affordability of the land/house price (30%)<sup>16</sup>. Not all respondents live in gated communities, and they argued that one of the main transformations of Chacras has been the construction of new neighbourhoods (both open and gated). When respondents were asked if they thought the development of gated communities was the main transformation in Chacras, 64% agreed and 21% strongly agreed with this statement. 12% were neutral to the statement and only 3% disagreed. No one strongly disagreed with this statement.

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16 This question allowed for up to two answers.

Some of the new gated communities have been built on land previously used for vine growing as the residential land use became more profitable for private developers. This is the case for Las Candelas, a gated community built 20 years ago in Chacras. Making reference to the history of the area, all the streets in this gated community bear names of grape varieties like Lambrusco, Malbec, Syrah, and Merlot. This gated community has a school (as analyzed later) and also sport facilities (including a swimming pool, tennis courts, and football pitch), a clubhouse, 24-hour security, green areas and well-maintained communal gardens. It occupies 35 hectares and there are 180 families living there, with further housing under construction<sup>17</sup>.

The decentralization of activities mentioned by Walker as an element for the transformation of suburbs can be seen in the case of Chacras in relation to the relocation of new services in this area. This became possible due to two factors: the improvement of the road infrastructure connecting Chacras to the city center; and the arrival of new residents to this suburb, who demanded new services and infrastructure. The National Motorway 40 ('Acceso Sur') connects Chacras to the city center in the East side of the city in about 20 minutes by car. It is currently being widened from a four-lane motorway (two lanes in each direction) to a six-lane motorway. 'Corredor del Oeste', the second

motorway, has greatly benefitted the population living in Chacras de Coria reducing the commuting time to the city center. Survey respondents considered the construction and improvement of motorways as the third most important change that occurred in Chacras in the last 20 years (26% of responses), after land use change and the construction of the new residential areas.

'Acceso Sur' and 'Corredor del Oeste' greatly contributed to the growth and better accessibility of Chacras de Coria and Luján de Cuyo. However, this suburban area does not have good road infrastructure. Neither public nor private investment has been strong enough to accompany the growth. Most secondary roads are former rural paths that have been paved, but not widened to service a more populated area. Private developers have brought new population to this suburb but they have not been forced by the public sector to contribute to road infrastructure improvements. Some new residents blame the municipality for not having improved roads that would facilitate better mobility. Suburban growth is based on the use of the private automobile, which increases traffic congestion and consequently, it takes more time to circulate within the suburb. The enlargement of 'Acceso Sur' will improve commuting from/to the city center. However the problem of insufficient

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17 Las Candelas website <http://www.barriolascandelas.com.ar>.

capacity of the secondary roads within Chacras de Coria has not yet been addressed. The public sector does not demand any type of road construction from developers to serve the areas outside of the gated communities. This problem is aggravated by an inefficient use of the private automobile. In the early 2000s 64% of the trips in Luján de Cuyo were made by car with only the driver (Gray de Cerdán, 2005).

The new residents have attracted new services and infrastructure to Chacras de Coria. This was considered by the survey respondents to be the fourth significant change (23%). Some kindergarten and private schools have been built in this suburb to meet the demand from new families with children in the area. In 2005 there were 110 schools (all levels, including nursery) increasing to 126 schools in 2010 in Luján de Cuyo<sup>18</sup>. Las Candelas is one of the first private schools in Chacras, established 20 years ago. It provides both primary and secondary education. Children receive education in Spanish and English to prepare them for a 'successful professional future'. After the construction of the school, a gated community was built next to the school. Students in this school come from both the gated community (which bears the same name, as explained earlier) and other gated and non-gated neighborhoods of Luján de Cuyo.

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18 DEIE, 2012. This information is not disaggregated by district.

In the last 20 years Chacras de Coria has also experienced a growth in the services and commercial amenities offered: small open malls, upscale restaurants, clothing stores for high-income customers, small private health clinics, and other commercial options for the new residents. One survey respondent commented: '*the opening of several shops, hotels, B&Bs, restaurants, small shopping centers has been done without much order [planning]*'. The main square of Chacras de Coria has been revitalized with upscale restaurants, ice-cream parlors, bakeries and other commercial stores in the surrounding area. There is also a local Sunday market for clothes and handcrafts.

Following Walker, the third geographic dimension refers to the uniformity of the urban landscape. This can be observed in Chacras de Coria as a consequence of the arrival of gated communities. These new residential areas present designs and typologies that can be seen in other cities in Argentina and also other cities in the world creating 'global suburbs'. The new shopping areas also follow designs imported from other cities and countries. Thus Chacras has lost some of the elements that used to provide a peculiar identity to the area.

The latter has also been lost as a result of agricultural land converted into residential land.

## ECONOMIC CHANGES

Chacras de Coria has also undergone significant economic changes. The private sector has been the main actor pushing for the growth of Chacras de Coria. Similarly to the US suburbs, the public sector has taken a step back as an active actor for urban service and infrastructure provision and the construction of housing. However, the public sector is responsible for the private urban sprawl as it enables the actions of the private sector by granting development approval for the new residential estates.

The private sector has been driven by land speculation as a consequence of land use changes. Despite the importance of vine growing for the economic development of Mendoza and Argentina, in the last three decades extensive areas formerly for vine cultivation have been converted into residential land. This has happened mainly in Chacras and Vistalba (the district located next to Chacras to the south). The construction of upper and middle-class neighborhoods (gated communities in particular) became more profitable for the private sector than wine production. Although there is no official data on this, it is calculated that there

are more than 30 gated communities (Figure 2) in Luján de Cuyo (and nearly 100 in MAM). Most of them have been built in the last 20 years. There are still new developments planned and under construction. In Chacras de Coria, houses in 'open' residential areas have also been built, but in smaller numbers and scale compared to the houses within gated communities.

In 1998, Chacras de Coria was still a relatively affordable residential area. The average price per square meter was USD\$22, while other areas of Luján de Cuyo were USD\$42 (La Puntilla) and USD\$47 (Huerto del Sol). Luján also had more affordable prices than central areas of Mendoza like Barrio Bombal (USD\$182), Quinta Sección (USD\$162) and Barrio Dalvian (USD\$82) (Badaloni, 1998). These prices refer to high-income residential areas (both open and gated). In 2001, it was estimated that the land prices in gated communities in the Metropolitan Area of Mendoza were between USD\$40 and USD\$150 per square meter (Vivir en barrios privados, 2001).

Barrio Pueyrredón is a prestigious gated community built in Chacras in 1999 (completed in the late 2000s). It has 183 lots. In 2006 the price of the land was between USD\$50 and USD\$70 per square meter. A 450 square-meter house on a 1000 square meter lot was for sale for USD\$500,000 in February 2016<sup>19</sup>.

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19 <http://casas.mitula.com.ar/casas/barrio-pueyrredon-mendoza-chacras-coria> (accessed 30/05/2016).

**FIGURE 2: ENTRANCE TO A GATED COMMUNITY IN CHACRAS DE CORIA (LUJÁN DE CUYO MUNICIPALITY)**



Source: author.

Chacras de Farrel is another prestigious gated community built in Chacras in the early 2000s. It has a total of 55 lots (between 800 to 1000 square meters each). Half of the lots were sold in the first months the project was on the market. According to one of the developers, the price of the land was USD\$15 per square meter in 1992 (before the project was developed). The land was sold at USD\$35 per square meter in 2003 and now the price is USD\$100 per square meter, even when there are no empty lots<sup>20</sup>. Figure 3 shows the location of

Chacras de Farrell and its diverse surroundings: residential areas for affluent families (houses with swimming pools), residential areas for low-income families (small lots and small houses), agriculture land use (vine growing), the layout of a new gated community, and other services and infrastructure.

The arrival of new population in Chacras, and in particular, a group of residents with high purchasing power, has encouraged the local economy. This can be seen in the new services (food and clothes stores in particular) in the area, as explained in the previous sub-section. Gated communities have also created social changes in the suburb.

## **SOCIAL CHANGES**

Chacras de Coria became a desired location for upper-middle class families who could afford a house there. As land became more expensive, social housing projects were built in other districts of Luján de Cuyo but not in Chacras.

The new residents of Chacras de Coria (and other areas of growth in Luján de Cuyo) are young families with children who seek individual private security and choose to live in gated communities or streets closed with security devices. They also want to have green areas (and most likely also a swimming pool) and a large house. Their motivations

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20 Data provided by one of the developers of this gated community. Email conversation. May 2016.

FIGURE 3: LOCATION OF CHACRAS DE FARRELL



Source: Google Maps

to live there are the same as for other gated communities in Argentina. These residents were previously living in other areas of MAM. They are professionals with university degrees and higher than average salaries. Of the respondents to the online survey, 39% said they were ‘independent

professionals’, and in some cases owners of their own business; 15% worked for the provincial or local government; 15% worked in the private sector; 15% worked for the national government; and 12% were retired (4% did not answer).

#### FIGURE 4: INFORMAL SETTLEMENT IN CHACRAS DE CORIA



Source: author.

A handful of prestigious gated communities (like Pueyrredón, El Remanso and Chacras de Farrell) were built between late 1990s and early 2000s. They are all now fully occupied. Several important business people from Mendoza and top-position politicians live in these gated communities.

At the same time that gated communities have increased, Luján de Cuyo still has a high proportion of the population with unmet basic needs (9% in 2010)<sup>21</sup>. In 1991, 5% of the economically active population was unemployed, slightly rising to 6% in 2010<sup>22</sup>.

The new gated community residents coexist (although this does not imply socialization or

close social relations) with the traditional residents of Chacras de Coria. These are families with lower incomes that still work on activities related to the wine production, or they do small jobs like home repair and plumbing. In addition, some new neighborhoods for lower-middle income families have been built by unions and professional organizations and new informal settlements have developed (Figure 4). Some of these residents hope to benefit from the growth of Chacras de Coria and find work as gardeners, security personnel or cleaners in the new gated communities. However, there is no evidence that this is the case.

Only one (out of 33) of the residents of Chacras de Coria who participated in the online survey identified himself/herself as being 'an old resident of Chacras'. All respondents, except one, said they knew 'old residents' because they go to the local bakery or local corner shop where they can meet/see these 'old residents' (69%) or because they have family or friends who are 'old residents' (61%)<sup>23</sup>.

These low-income families live in areas with more deficient infrastructure and do not have access to the services provided for upper-class families as they cannot afford them. Social inequalities between old and new residents, poor and wealthy residents and the use of public and private spaces are evident in Chacras de Coria. These two groups

21 DEIE website <http://www.deie.mendoza.gov.ar>

22 DEIE website <http://www.deie.mendoza.gov.ar>

23 This question allowed for up to two multiple answers.

do not meet and interact often because they have different consumption habits, use different recreational facilities and use different amenities<sup>24</sup>. Income disparities can be seen not only in the type of housing but also in the goods and belongings that can be used as a proxy variable of income and purchasing power: 23% of the households living in Chacras de Coria do not have a computer, 6% of the households do not have a mobile phone and 1% do not have a fridge. Also 2% of the households have at least one indicator of unmet basic needs (poverty indicators)<sup>25</sup>. There are still housing structures built with precarious materials: in 2011 12% of the structures in Chacras were built with *adobe*, even when MAM is an area prone to earthquakes<sup>26</sup>. Chacras de Coria shows evidence of splintering (sub) urbanism and strong social differences (Figure 5).

For local residents and for citizens of Mendoza in general, Chacras de Coria has a positive image, not related to poverty. When on line survey respondents were asked if they thought Chacras was considered one of the most prestigious residential

areas in Mendoza, 58% agreed with this statement, 18% strongly agreed, and 24% were neutral. There were no respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

At the moment, both poor and rich residents seem to coexist well in the same territory by trying to avoid contact with each other. However, there have been some occasional tensions. In 2015, the leaders of the residents' association of a poor neighborhood located next to Chacras de Farrell (a prestigious gated community, as previously mentioned) presented a formal complaint to the provincial court of justice (neighborhood on the left side of the gated community in Figure 3). The association argued that the gated community had set a new fence that restricted residents to get access to their own open neighborhood. The association also said that the gated community had set CCTV cameras outside the perimeter that invaded the privacy of the residents on the other side of the wall<sup>27</sup>.

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24 For example, children from gated communities attend private schools, they do not attend the public schools in Chacras.

25 Data for 2010, DEIE website.

26 With the construction of new housing in this district, the percentage of precarious structures has decreased from 24% of adobe construction in 2008 to 12% in 2011 (DEIE website).

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27 <http://www.mendozapost.com/nota/20923-guerra-de-pobres-contra-ricos-en-chacras-de-coria/>. The outcome of this conflict is not yet publicly known.

**FIGURE 5: SOCIAL DIFFERENCES IN CHACRAS DE CORIA: A LOW-INCOME NEIGHBORHOOD FACING A WALL WITH SECURITY DEVICES OF A WEALTHY HOUSE**



Source: author.

## Conclusion

The Argentine suburbia has experienced geographic, economic and social transformations over the last two decades. This can be seen in the case of Chacras de Coria in the Metropolitan Area of Mendoza where gated communities are responsible for most of these transformations.

Chacras de Coria has become a more heterogeneous suburb where the residential use is rapidly taking the lead over other land uses. Commercial and recreational uses have also developed to

satisfy the demands of a group that build its identity based on consumption and social distinction. The private sector has been the main actor driving the growth of Chacras, with the support of the local government. The agricultural land use (mainly for vine growing) that used to be characteristic of the rural landscape has decreased, although there are still 16 wineries located in this suburb. Chacras does not have the image of the homogeneous US suburb. The arrival of upper- and upper-middle income families to the periphery has changed the image of three decades ago. Suburbia has now rural and urban areas, poor and wealthy residents and public and private spaces for public and open, or private and restricted, use.

The arrival of gated communities to the periphery of the city is creating more heterogeneity and diversity with different social groups coexisting in a reduced suburban territory. Coexistence does not mean interaction and acknowledgement of the differences. Social differences are more noticeable because of the spatial proximity. However, the walls and fences of gated communities act as a veil to obscure the 'unwanted' and this encourages spatial and social inequalities. Geographic, economic and social changes are intertwined and influence each other. The arrival of the new affluent residents means a change of vocabulary from 'periphery' to 'suburbia', from negative aspects (or poor provision of services and infrastructure) to positive aspects (or a flourishing development of the outskirts).

However, it does not seem to be either one or the other but a coexistence of both situations conforming to a splintered (sub) urban reality.

The peaceful coexistence of different social groups would require not only acceptance of the differences but also equity in the access to services and infrastructure in the Argentine suburbs. The role of the public sector becomes central here to make sure the expansion of privatized suburbia can contribute to the development of the public suburbia. The public sector should regulate the private sector to ensure that high profits and satisfying the locational desires of a privileged social group are not the only objectives, but rather there is also a sense of responsibility for how the city is built with all the stakeholders involved. The transformations analyzed for the case of Chacras de Coria can also be identified in other cities and countries that are facing similar challenges. This article contributes to the knowledge on the transformations of cities that usually receives little research attention.

The growth of suburbia also needs to be discussed in relation to the 'New urban agenda' agreed in the Habitat III United Nations Conference (Quito, Ecuador, October 2016). Can the world afford an unlimited growth of suburbia? Would this be sustainable and ethically responsible? Or would it be best to promote more dense urban areas? What type of cities do we want and need? These are

some of the questions that need to be addressed to achieve a sustainable and just city for all.

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