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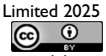

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The flammable city: Infrastructure, temporalities, and social struggles in Dock Sud, Buenos Aires

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Abstract

This article explores the impacts of large-scale infrastructure operations in Buenos Aires. Focussing on neo-extractive and logistical infrastructures in the southern area of Dock Sud, it investigates how these infrastructures *urbanise* – namely, how they integrate into urban spaces and the socio-spatial and material dynamics they generate. It does so by investigating the relationships between materiality and temporality, highlighting their complex and multifaceted interplay. While adopting a view *from below* – that is, by analysing the social conflicts experienced by those living in the spaces surrounding these infrastructures – the discussion sheds light on how Dock Sud's urban materiality is contested through the creation of distinct and often conflicting temporalities. Specifically, the article delves into the socio-material situation of Villa Inflamable shantytown by scrutinising what it terms the politics of 'mientras tanto' [meanwhile], showing how residents *reversed* the state's and municipality's promotion of a prolonged condition of waiting to confront their extremely precarious and hazardous urban conditions. It contends that the mientras tanto reveals the fragmented 'time – space' of infrastructure, shedding light on its profoundly uneven socio-material dynamics and the related disputes that play out at the level of temporalities. The article argues that Dock Sud can be understood as the manifestation of a *flammable city* – specifically, the combination of the tireless political action conducted by the residents on the one hand, and the severe environmental conditions that the area suffers on the other.

Keywords

Buenos Aires, environmental justice, infrastructure, temporalities, urban struggles

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摘要

本文探讨了布宜诺斯艾利斯大规模基础设施运营的影响。我们重点关注 Dock Sud 南部地区的新型采掘和物流基础设施，考察这些基础设施如何城市化，即它们如何融入城市空间，及其产生的社会空间和物质动态。本文通过考察物质性和时间性之间的关联来实现这一目的，并着重凸显二者复杂且多维度的相互作用。本文的讨论采用自下而上的视角 ——即分析居住在这些基础设施周围空间的人们所经历的社会冲突 ——揭示了人们如何通过创造独特且常常相互冲突的时间性，来对 Dock Sud 的城市物质性进行争夺。具体来说，本文通过审视所谓的“mientras tanto”（同时）政治，深入探讨 Villa Inflamable 棚户区的社会物质状况，展示了居民如何扭转联邦直辖区和市政当局推动的长期等待状态，以应对极其不稳定和危险的城市条件。本文认为，mientras tanto 揭示了基础设施碎片化的“时空”，阐明了其极不平衡的社会物质动态以及在时间性层面上发生的相关争议。本文认为，Dock Sud 可被理解为“易燃城市”的具象体现——具体而言，这种体现源于两方面的结合：一方面是当地居民持续不断的政治行动，另一方面则是该区域所承受的严峻环境状况。

关键词

布宜诺斯艾利斯、环境正义、基础设施、时间性、城市斗争

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Introduction

Large-scale infrastructure projects have captured the attention of scholars across several disciplines over the past decade. Following the '*infrastructure turn*' that has 'invested' the social sciences (Dodson, 2017), the 'operations' of infrastructure (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019) have been extensively analysed through their economic, political, and social impacts on surrounding spaces. In particular, infrastructure has been understood as a modifier of the environment, within an inseparable combination of human and non-human components (Hetherington, 2018). Extending this trajectory, the relation between infrastructure and urbanisation has gained prominence, with urbanists and social scientists exploring how global infrastructure connects with and transforms urban landscapes (Apostolopoulou et al., 2024; Kanai and Schindler, 2022; Vegliò et al., 2025; Wiig and Silver, 2019). Yet, while these studies have expanded knowledge on infrastructure operations and their relations to urbanisation, a large number of specific situations and processes, which could in turn further elaborate the conceptual discussion on these topics, remain largely underexplored. For example, little attention has been paid to how the combination of neo-extractive and logistical infrastructures, such as large petrochemical compounds built near commercial ports, interacts with and affects urban environments. This article intervenes in these discussions by delving into the 'time – space' (Crang, 2005; Panelli, 2007) of Dock Sud, Buenos Aires, analysing the radical social conflicts that emerge from its specific infrastructure configuration. In this way, it examines the modalities by which the conjuncture of neo-extractive and logistical infrastructures *urbanises* – namely, how they integrate into urban spaces and the socio-spatial and material dynamics they generate.

To do so, the article focuses on the relationship between materiality and temporality, studying their entangled and multifaceted interplay. While adopting a view *from below* – that is, by analysing the social conflicts enacted by the residents

living in the spaces surrounding the infrastructures – the discussion sheds light on how Dock Sud's urban materiality is disputed through the making of distinct and conflicting temporalities. Specifically, the article delves into the socio-material situation in Villa Inflamable shantytown[1] by scrutinising what it terms the politics of 'mientras tanto' [meanwhile], showing how residents *reversed* the state's and municipality's promotion of a prolonged condition of waiting, where no measures were implemented or encouraged to address the area's extremely precarious and dangerous urban conditions. The mientras tanto is thus a political strategy that operates at the level of temporality to transform Dock Sud's materialities, a strategy that emerges from a dangerous – if not catastrophic – spatial conjuncture that integrates infrastructure operations, environmental degradation, and the making of an extremely precarious urban fabric. Consequently, drawing on the paramount importance of combustibles in the area's activities, the article understands Dock Sud as the manifestation of a *flammable city* – specifically, the combination of the tireless political action conducted by the residents on the one hand, and the extreme environmental conditions that the area suffers on the other.

The dynamics of the mientras tanto emerged from the specific urban and environmental context of Dock Sud, an area that acts as an internal frontier within Buenos Aires' urbanisation. Dock Sud is characterised by the simultaneous presence of a commercial port of regional importance, a large petrochemical compound, several precarious urban settlements, and what is considered to be one of the most polluted rivers in the world, the Matanza – Riachuelo River (Illuminem, 2023). The port of Dock Sud is an important commercial entry point in the Southern Cone, particularly for containers (DatamarNews, 2024), and it is also a key node for the internal market of liquid fuels and gas (Marine Insight, 2022), providing storage and shipment services to petrochemical companies (Consorcio de Gestión del Puerto Dock Sud, n.d.). Although defined by poor urban infrastructure, socio-material precariousness, and substantial marginalisation from the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA)'s economic structures (Todo Noticias, 2016) – Dock Sud is located just about 30 blocks from the iconic Plaza de Mayo and Casa Rosada (the President's workplace) – Dock Sud holds significant geo economic importance given the prominence of its large infrastructures, serving as a vital 'operational landscape' for global space (Brenner and Katsikis, 2020).

The research was conducted between 2021 and 2024 and relied on several fieldwork missions. It builds on semi-structured interviews with Dock Sud's inhabitants (especially in Villa Inflamable, 20 interviews), Port of Dock Sud's management (four interviews), local officers (eight interviews), non-governmental associations (four interviews), and the consultation of policy and official documents, newspapers from local and national press, as well as academic and non-academic secondary sources. The empirical material analysed in this text focuses especially on the interviews conducted with the residents, most of whom are activists involved in small political organisations operating at a neighbourhood scale. The rest of the material consists of documents and sources that are used to frame and support the discussion.

The space of infrastructure: The nexus between materiality and temporality

Infrastructure space (Easterling, 2014) has been investigated through a multitude of vantage points. This article particularly engages with and contributes to debates on

the role of logistical and neo-extractive infrastructures in shaping and integrating into urban environments. On the one hand, a body of critical scholarship has highlighted the significance of logistical clusters in organising and directing the impressive circulation of goods that is vital for the sustenance of the global economy, also stressing the colonial geographies underlying the contemporary routes of global supply chains (Chua et al., 2018; Cowen, 2014; Khalili, 2020). Notably, scholars have underlined the role of commercial ports in shaping uneven urban spaces arising from global logistical imperatives (Apostolopoulou, 2024; Neilson and Rossiter, 2014, 2021), which is to say, an operation that consists of – in Cowen's words – scrutinising the multiple ways 'circulation is urbanised', and how this goes to articulate 'particular forms of urban space and urban life' (Cowen, 2014: 184). Following this spatio-analytical approach, scholars have delved into the characteristics of what they termed 'the logistics city' (e.g. Budrovich-Sáez, 2021; Danyluk, 2021), arguing that the global transformation of logistics has caused ports to play a 'new role of key agents of the global goods supply chain' and, in so doing, 'the port-city becomes the terminal-city/logistics-city' (Budrovich-Sáez, 2021: 30), along with its problematic and socio-spatial specificities, such as harsh 'regimes of governance and control' (Rossiter, 2014: 54).

At the same time, an emerging scholarship has stressed the role of neo-extractive activities in severely affecting environments and local populations (Acosta, 2013; Gudynas, 2020; Svampa, 2019). By initially using Latin America as a space of analysis, and by embracing several disciplines such as geography, political theory, economics, sociology, etc., scholars have highlighted how these activities concern not only the "traditional" removal of natural resources like oil, gas, metals, and minerals, but also sectors such as agriculture, forestry, fishery, as well as aggressive operations of financialisation in these sectors (Gago and Mezzadra, 2017). In the case of petrochemical activities, the several stages of production are typically divided into the initial upstream (exploration and removal of the material), midstream (transportation and storage), and downstream (transformation into final products) phases, in what can be understood, building on Arboleda's work (2020), as a *circuit of extraction*, which engages with and problematically transforms a number of often diverse and geographically distant spaces along its route. Particularly relevant to this study, the downstream stage corresponds to activities taking place in petrochemical complexes (e.g. in a refinery), and numerous studies have recently outlined the severe environmental consequences of this part of the process (Adams et al., 2020; Mah and Wang, 2019; Nadal et al., 2011; Rovira et al., 2021; Verbeek, 2021), highlighting the existence of 'toxic geographies' that criss-cross global space (Davies, 2018, 2022).

In Dock Sud, the coinciding existence of logistical and neo-extractive infrastructures serves as an important example of how the described operations integrate into and mould urban fabric. Recent studies of infrastructure, and especially in the fields of geography, anthropology, and science and technology studies (STS), have stressed the ways in which the material elements of infrastructure contain and produce a variety of temporal frames and imaginations. For example, while unpacking such a multifaceted relationship, anthropologists have outlined that 'the material and political lives of infrastructure frequently undermine narratives of technological progress, liberal equality, and economic growth, revealing fragile and often violent relations between people, things, and the institutions that govern or provision them' (Appel et al., 2018: 3). While examining such a problematic relation

between the promise of progress and the everyday experiences of Dock Sud residents, this article aims to capture the 'time frames' and 'temporal codes' of infrastructure (Addie et al., 2024: 2). Neo-extractive and logistical spaces are understood here as infrastructural experiences marked by 'a convulsion of exploration and abandonment shaped not by linear teleologies of developmental time' (Appel, 2018: 54), thus differing from the idea of infrastructure as a necessarily progressive and unidirectional sequence of functions and operations. Yet, the absence of a well-defined direction very often implies that, as Simone (2024: 95) evocatively notes while scrutinising urban temporalities in West Papua, 'time is literally all over the place' and is composed of multiple and clashing articulations, such as the time of 'unsettling', 'jettisoning', and 'quotidian disjunctions', within a process that continually creates a 'provisional assemblage' of socio-material and political spatialities. Hence, as opposed to economistic and positivist approaches to urbanisation and urban planning, I delve here into the 'stuttering temporalities of resource discovery, exploitation, and exhaustion' (Appel, 2018: 54), exploring the ways in which diverse and contradictory temporalities unfold from infrastructure space. In other words, Dock Sud is examined from a 'temporal perspective' (Coutard, 2024: 74), specifically scrutinising how 'interactions between individuals, between activities, and between societies and the wider environment are organised and controlled' (Coutard, 2024: 77), exposing how temporalities simultaneously structure, disrupt, and contest the urban space of infrastructure.

Moreover, geographers such as Ramakrishnan et al. (2021: 676), while reflecting on the wide range of socio-material configurations generated by infrastructure, have demonstrated how 'the temporal connects the material, affective and the social aspects of infrastructure.' Building on this view, and to clarify the terminology, I contend that temporalities are here understood as (formulations of) *visualisations of time*, through which the interaction between infrastructure and urbanisation is continuously produced and negotiated by the actors involved. As Gupta (2018: 62) also suggested, infrastructure implies 'a process that is characterised by multiple temporalities, open futures, and the constant presence of decay and ruination'. Nevertheless, as the case of Dock Sud seems to demonstrate, decay and ruination do not only necessarily affect infrastructure itself, they can also extend into surrounding environments, in a way that the degradation of urban space seems to provide a necessary element – as a sort of *anticipative effect* – for the development and function of certain infrastructures. Furthermore, and crucially, the relationship between materiality and temporality also appears to be mutually constitutive. Not only are infrastructures catalysts for temporalities, but also, temporalities 'are predicated upon, and produce, different material conditions, social perceptions and labour, power geometries and policies, and socio-ecological relations' (Ramakrishnan et al., 2021: 676). The exploration of the complex and co-constitutive relations between temporalities and socio-material dynamics – in the context of large-scale infrastructure – lies at the core of this study.

The making of Dock Sud: Infrastructure, urbanisation, and 'environmental suffering'

The area of Dock Sud is located in the immediate south of Buenos Aires, where the Matanza – Riachuelo River pours its waters into the River Plate estuary. The Matanza – Riachuelo mouth played a fundamental role in forming Buenos Aires as it served as a fundamental point of entrance and settlement for the huge waves of European

migrants that flowed into Argentina starting in the late 19th century. At the same time, the river mouth progressively began to represent a sharp division – later also in political and administrative terms – between the wealthy centre of the city (CABA) and its vast and generally precarious southern areas (now part of Buenos Aires Province). Dock Sud's urbanisation has largely been thought of in connection with the construction and transformation of the port (which opened in 1905) and the actual integration of the port with its surrounding urban landscape still represents a major challenge (Aversa and Jáuregui, 2021).

Another element that highly impacted the socio-material and environmental making of Dock Sud is its large petrochemical compound. Royal Dutch Shell began developing petrochemical activities in the area adjacent to the port in 1914, setting up the first oil refinery in 1931. Since then, a progressive increase in petrochemical activities has distinguished the area and, especially from the 1970s, the petrochemical compound of Dock Sud began to host oil plants, refineries, and incinerators for toxic residues, as well as plants for treatment, reception, and storage of chemical products, becoming Argentina's largest petrochemical complex. Its activities had a dramatic impact on Dock Sud's life. The compound attracted migrants from the interior of the country, who typically settled in its proximity and quickly outnumbered the previous residents, who were primarily engaged in small-scale farming (Atlas del Conurbano Bonaerense/UNDAV, 2016). The area thus transformed from a small cluster of scattered family houses, each normally with a small plot of land for cultivation (then known as *Villa Prost*), into an informal settlement with hundreds of precarious, self-built constructions lacking basic services such as water, electricity, and sewage. In the 1980s, when a ship carrying combustible materials exploded (ArgenPorts, 2024), a new dock exclusively dedicated to flammable products was built, and Villa Prost, which was located right next to this new dock, became known as *Villa Inflamable* (literally, Flammable Shantytown). Crucially, the compound's activities had an enormous impact on air, soil, and water pollution, and dramatically affected the inhabitants' lives. In their iconic work on Villa Inflamable, Auyero and Swistun (2009) explored the multiple dimensions in which 'environmental suffering' took shape in the settlement. While conducting an anthropological inquiry, the authors unpacked the situation in Villa Inflamable, showing how state officials kept the residents in an obscure situation of ambiguity about pollution and potential relocation. The book is a remarkable contribution that offers, on the one hand, a detailed description of Villa Inflamable's situation in the early 2000s, and, on the other, an important example of what life in the proximities of petrochemical compounds can be like, especially under certain socio-political conditions.

As for the environmental situation, a turning point occurred in 2004, when some of the residents of Villa Inflamable filed a lawsuit against the State, Buenos Aires Province, CABA, and the 44 companies that made up the petrochemical compound at the time, citing the severe impact of the compound's activities on the environment and public health (Procuración General de la Nación, 2004). The lawsuit became known as the Mendoza Case, named after the resident who led the action. In 2008, the Supreme Court arrived at a historic verdict in which it recognised the responsibility of the petrochemical companies for contaminating the surrounding areas, and ordered the State, Buenos Aires Province, and CABA to guarantee a healthy environment not only to the people living in Dock Sud, but also those living in the whole Matanza – Riachuelo basin (Corte Suprema de Justicia

de la Nación, 2008). It is important to note that the basin is a large area that extends mostly within Buenos Aires Province and hosts nearly 5 million people, most of whom live along the river's shores. The inclusion of the basin in the Mendoza Case is due to the fact that the basin has historically been characterised by its high pollution – it is considered to be one of the most polluted areas in the world (La Nación, 2013) – as a result of the industrial activities (principally tanneries, chemical plants, and factories) that have settled along its route since the late 19th century. Over 1 million of the basin's residents live in precarious settlements lacking basic infrastructural services (Fainstein, 2020: 167). As a development of the Mendoza Case, the National Congress, through Law N. 26.168, created ACUMAR (Matanza – Riachuelo Basin Authority [*Autoridad de Cuenca Matanza – Riachuelo*], an interjurisdictional body responsible for the sanitation of the basin. Interestingly, ACUMAR is made up of a combination of political authorities acting at different levels, namely the state (through the presence of the Ministry of Public Works), CABA, and Buenos Aires Province, thus effectively summarising the complex administrative articulation of the case. Not least, the presence of global capital in the form of powerful international companies such as, among others, Shell/Raízen,[2] indicates the multi-scalar economic structure of the area. In 2008, The Supreme Court's verdict gave ACUMAR the exclusive responsibility for, among other elements, 'restoring the environment in all its components (water, air, and soil)' (Corte Suprema de Justicia de la Nación, 2008: 16) and 'relocating the residents' from areas of 'high risk' (Corte Suprema de Justicia de la Nación, 2008: 17). This paper focuses on the situation that has developed as a result of the 2008 verdict.

It is not surprising that, shortly after the 2008 directives, Villa Inflamable was one of the settlements ordered to be almost entirely relocated – around 1200 families out of the 17,771 slated for relocation in the whole basin (ACUMAR, 2010). While several studies had already highlighted the severe environmental conditions in the area since the early 2000s (Defensoría del Pueblo de la Nación Argentina, 2003), the relocation was resisted by a large group of residents who did not want to leave the settlement. Although the housing quality in the new neighbourhood (named Barrio Alianza) was supposed to noticeably improve living conditions,[3] during my fieldwork activities several residents reported that there was a widespread scepticism about whether moving less than a kilometre along the Matanza – Riachuelo shore would actually reduce the health risks. Moreover, many residents did not want to lose their informal work and their family and friend networks in the settlement, and they were concerned about the safety of the new area (ACIJ, 2012: 12). Despite the reasons the residents cited against the relocation, such resistance is an interesting element to consider – and perhaps unexpected given the harsh environmental conditions they were living in. Similar resistance had already emerged among the residents in the years preceding ACUMAR's decisions (Auyero and Swistun, 2009). In any case, the relocation never happened. From 2010, the absence of information about the relocation created a peculiar and long-lasting situation of *impasse* in which, on the one hand, the municipality did not provide or allow any infrastructural improvements in the settlement as the residents were supposed to leave, and, on the other, the relocation was far from happening. To clarify, infrastructural improvements refer to a settlement that at that time lacked basic services such as, for instance, water access, a sewer system, public lighting, a waste collection system, and paved streets. We are going to explore the residents' political behaviour

during this long period of impasse that lasted more than a decade, a period that, despite the paralysing absence of concrete decisions, was nonetheless politically and materially transformative.

The politics of mientras tanto

Several organisations of residents have been active in Villa Inflamable over the past couple of decades. The *Sociedad de Fomento*, a community development association that can be found in several precarious Argentine urban areas, has been present in the settlement since the 1970s; other groups were established after the Mendoza Case and the creation of ACUMAR. However, with a few exceptions (for instance, *Sembrando Juntos* [Sowing Together] and the government-supported *Comedor Popular* [Community Kitchen]), these organisations have had short lifespans, and the alliances between them have been weak and sporadic, in a context historically marked by individual action as well as sense of powerlessness and resigned indifference (Auyero, 2012; Auyero and Swistun, 2009). To understand the residents' views and actions following the 2008 verdict, I sought access to the settlement and gained it by building on academic and non-academic networks that I had established in Buenos Aires since 2012. That year, I visited Villa Inflamable several times and was able to create some contacts in the settlement. I could thus engage with the residents, both those who were part of the mentioned organisations and those who were not, or were only occasionally involved. To respect anonymity and avoid identification, I will not specify the names of associations and people. The names used for individuals are pseudonyms, while gender and age are real. The conversations refer to the situation of impasse that can broadly be associated with the 2010–2021 period (though they also touched earlier years to better frame the context), after which the residents were told that the relocation would not take place, and the area would be 'urbanised'[4] under the direction of the municipality (ACUMAR, 2021a, 2021b).[5]

As we can infer from Auyero (2012: 128–152), the situation of impasse was not a novelty resulting from the Mendoza verdict, although it certainly pushed it to an emergency level. Auyero (2012, see also 2021) showed how the state adopts *waiting as politics* to keep the residents trapped in a silent and undefined temporality that blocks their political action. While fully agreeing with this thesis, I am going to show how the residents transformed such a situation into *active behaviours*, engaging with a strategy of protest to improve the socio-material conditions of Villa Inflamable. Echoing the residents' voice, I will call this strategy the 'politics of *mientras tanto*', as it emerged in many interviews and conversations I had with them. This expression has become so widespread in the settlement, especially among the most active residents, that it even appeared in an article in the local press (InfoBaires24, 2022).[6] Although framed differently depending on the case, the politics of waiting is not a specificity of Dock Sud – whereas its response, the mientras tanto, is significantly distinctive – some scholars have pointed up the adoption of such a strategy in Southern cities and beyond. For instance, DiCarlo examined the contradictory effects of the Laos–China Railway project by highlighting how the planners' promises of speed and rapid connectivity are contrasted with the 'lived experiences of waiting, delay, and suspension' (DiCarlo, 2024: 208), the latter often representing a social condition underlying the development of mega-infrastructure projects. Waiting is also adopted as a form of governance in large-scale urban redevelopment projects in Turkey, where residents are exposed to long

and indefinite periods of time to weaken their political agency (Ay and Penpecioglu, 2024). In the Australian context, waiting is used as a strategy of control over female workers, in opposition to the mobility of their partners (Straughan et al., 2020). Overall, such politics of power based on waiting generate 'suspended presents' (Carse and Kneas, 2019) that, deployed by powerful actors through political, legal, and discursive means, penetrate and destabilise the lives of local populations.

> It's been 13 years since we've been doing the mientras tanto. We did it continuously: to fix one street, to have a bit more light in another, and so forth. It was never a whole plan of urbanisation, but just single struggles conducted by little groups of residents. They say they are going to urbanise now [in 2022], but who knows, we need to continue anyway.

This is Romina, a 56-year-old woman with a long-standing activist presence in the settlement, explaining to me how many residents faced the situation of impasse. 'We've always been speaking about rights, and not favours […]. We started in 2009, we were about 20 people', underlining that while residents came and left throughout the years due to different reasons, her group managed to remain constantly active; people from different parts of the settlement joined according to their specific needs. Above all, Romina specified that, as the residents began to feel trapped in that unchanging time between potential relocation and actual everyday life in the settlement, they started asking themselves 'why wait so long?' And this question particularly depicts the *overturning* of the passivising effects caused by the politics of waiting. She continued to explain:

> at that time, when we started the mientras tanto, we were fighting for everything: street paving, lighting, water access, trash collection, a sewer system. Our idea was: ok, maybe we are going to be relocated but, *meanwhile*, we must have our basic rights. And we'll fight for them.

While scholars discussed the absence of temporalities in the theorisation of social movements (Gillan, 2020) and explained the importance of considering the 'temporal dimensions of activism' (Panelli, 2007), Dock Sud particularly illuminates how residents deliberately *broke with* the temporality imposed by infrastructure (in conjunction with the state and local administrations) – the permanent wait (Auyero, 2012) – thus disarticulating the strategy aimed at freezing their action. Specifically, in this case, residents reversed the perception of seamless time by activating the idea of mientras tanto, which promoted a sense of immediate albeit partial initiative.

Such an overturn of temporality is frequently framed through the discourse of rights among residents. Julio, a 64-year-old, reported that, shortly after beginning the actions, which initially consisted of street protests,

> we realised that going to the street wasn't enough, and thanks to some people who were helping us with the bureaucratic aspects of our struggle, we understood that we also had the right to information. And that's why we contacted ACIJ,[7] to help us find the legal strategies to conduct our fight.

The lawyers began providing legal assistance during the period of impasse, denouncing issues such as the unjustified order by the municipality to ban the introduction of building materials into the settlement (where most constructions are self-built), the lack of reliable information regarding relocation, and the persistent environmental issues in the area (ACIJ, 2012). The mientras tanto thus began to be endowed with legal tools. Far from seeing the mientras tanto driven

by a sort of naive spontaneity, the strategical thinking and remoulding of initiatives actually emerged as structural. Several residents gathered and formed groups and associations – however ephemeral they may have been – organised public demonstrations, engaged legal actions, carried out road blockades [cortes de ruta], and managed to establish regular discussion tables (*mesas de trabajo*) with the municipality and ACUMAR. Within this initial portrayal of the mientras tanto, both the acceptance and intention to overturn Dock Sud's paralysed temporality exposes the problematic relationship between infrastructure and urbanisation, whereby the former typically assumes, as Addie et al. (2024: 2) suggest, the changing form of 'spatiotemporal products, constructed through intersecting times: of planning, of capital flows, of political cycles, of embodied practice, and of the material properties of their organic and inorganic assemblages'. In Dock Sud, the ephemeral and ever-changing temporality of urban infrastructure – so different from the seemingly everlasting and unchanging time frame embodied in the 'big infrastructure' of the port and the petrochemical compound—relates to a materiality that is continuously at stake, in constant need of negotiation. Recalling Guma's (2022: 59) work, a permanent state of 'temporal incompleteness' can be visibly identified here – a scenario in which infrastructures are embedded in distinctive and contradictory temporalities, often establishing oppositional relationships within the urban environment; hence, the case of Dock Sud reaffirms the 'spatially transient nature of infrastructure processes' (Guma, 2022: 60). In fact, as several residents noted, the mientras tanto gave tangible results. Among the most important transformations, the settlement gained drinking water supply through the installation of three cistern tanks, with water being distributed among residents twice a day; many streets were paved and provided with lighting; and a waste collection system was implemented.

When I asked Romina what she thought of as their best effective initiatives, she swiftly responded: 'We did a lot of road blockades. If we count every single action, I think we definitely achieved the most through road blockades. We blocked for anything: lighting, water, and anything we wanted'. Similar statements emerged in most interviews. A key element to consider when observing this action is *where* the blockades were organised. The residents were well aware of what worked best in terms of disruption of everyday flows, and chose locations accordingly. Another resident explained:

> sometimes even the residents who live in the furthest areas of the neighbourhood came here to block the road. They do so because this is where the tracks carrying fuel coming from the petrochemical compound pass. And if you don't let them through, they go crazy! (Juan, 65 years old)

Coming from a long-lasting experience of activism, he describes what he learnt during the situation that emerged from the Mendoza Case:

> You know, I think they [the municipality and ACUMAR] manage everything with silence. They make decisions about the neighbourhood and don't let anybody know. They just do it. They never reply to the letters we constantly send. Never. They don't answer the phone. And none of them comes when we do demonstrations in the street or in front of the municipality. But, you know, when we block a road, in 30 minutes the municipality comes and asks us: 'What do you want?'

The effectiveness of road blockades is a crucial aspect. Within the unfolding, unmaking, and overturning of temporalities that characterise the relationship between infrastructure

and urbanisation, the interruption of circulation is a fundamental form of resistance to the production of infrastructure space. This is of course not a novel fact, as much literature has emphasised (e.g. Bernes, 2013; Chua and Bosworth, 2023; Cowen, 2014; Mitchell, 2011). Yet, if we observe how this occurs in Dock Sud, there is a specific clash between the temporalities that emerge in the area. We can identify a double and inverse relationship. On the one hand, the indefinite condition of Villa Inflamable is defied by the politics of mientras tanto, which aims to construct a more stable and possibly long-term material configuration of the settlement, overturning the effect of the silent and interminable wait. To make it possible, a break from the fast temporality of circulation seems to be necessary. This is a dispute over the 'time-space' of Dock Sud (Crang, 2005; Panelli, 2007), that is, a frame in which space is 'often mutually and problematically defined by and with problematic concepts of time' (Crang, 2005: 200). This illuminates, I argue, the fragmented geometries of infrastructure space, which are populated by asymmetrical socio-material relations that produce conflicts conducted at the level of temporalities—namely, as mentioned above, diverse visualisations of time.

As Laura (43 years old) outlines, 'our rights must involve a safe environment'. And several residents in Villa Inflamable confirmed that the mientras tanto cannot be separated from the question of the environment. She explains:

> When you go around the neighbourhood, there are days in which there are awful odours spreading through the streets. I know it as I'm distributing water twice a day, going across the whole neighbourhood. Sometimes odours are so strong that you feel your eyes and throat irritated, as a kind of dull pain, and you can even get headaches at times. They are sometimes like ammonia, others like burning trash, or rotten eggs.

The story of the Mendoza Case remains vivid for the residents; although their perspectives differ, environmental issues consistently emerge in conversations with them. Romina says: 'we have always wanted a hospital', then asking,

> who takes care of those who have leukaemia, cancer, or severe skin conditions, including those with any pneumological illnesses? Who cares about them? I tell you, no one. They don't leave the neighbourhood to search for health centres in the city, due to time, and because many don't know what they can actually do.

She reaffirms, 'we need a hospital'. This claim is shared among many residents I talked to. While there is a small health centre within the space of the Sociedad de Fomento, it only works as a first point of contact (it was set up during the emergency phase of the pandemic), and several residents believe it is inadequate to face the health issues spreading in Villa Inflamable. Julio insists on this point: 'we have the right to live in a safe environment. I mean, I have an open-air sewer here next to my house. We have the right to water, the right to sewer; they are part of a safe environment. Everything is about the environment'. The experience of petrochemical pollution silently affects people's places and lives, in a way that can be understood as a constant exertion of 'slow violence' (Davies, 2022), which unconcernedly crosses the geographies of global capitalism; in Dock Sud, slow violence – in the form of a quiet and unified harm to the combination of bodies and the environment – seems to occur 'at the hands of an unlocatable, dispersed, and contested polluter' (Davies, 2018: 1540). In the landscape of the mientras tanto, the contaminated environment connects and disconnects the residents' views depending on a variety of elements that influence their perception and beliefs about pollution (Auyero

and Swistun, 2009; Ursino, 2012). As underscored by Schindler and Kanai (2024), such a complex relationship between 'infrastructure fundamentalism', politics, and the environment involves operations that mobilise temporalities operating at multiple levels, and that often encompass and transform urban space. Yet, the lingering and indefinite temporality of infrastructural pollution in Dock Sud – which is constructed upon intersecting layers of invisibility, uncertainty, and fear, as well as the unremitting rhythms of neo-extraction and circulation – is challenged by the residents' urgent demand for information, security, and safe infrastructure.

Conclusion

If contemporary urban space concerns not only the production of iconic cities and fashionable urban centres, but also the formation of 'spatial expansion and articulation and the profusion of operational landscapes […] in which different kinds of landscapes and economies are sutured together' (Simone, 2019: 991; see also Simone et al., 2025), the space of Dock Sud, with its bulky neo-extractive and logistical infrastructures, its precarious urban materialities, its damaged environment, and its conflicting temporalities clearly embodies this urban condition. It is a space that is less noticeable, profoundly asymmetrical, yet central to the operational functioning of global capital (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019). Delving into this double condition of (operational) centrality and (socio-material) peripherality, the article has explored the temporalities emerging from Dock Sud's infrastructure space and how they have been reconfiguring and clashing in response to shifting political processes. In particular, the development of Villa Inflamable's conflicts has shown how social struggles can quickly articulate differently depending on the context. In fact, temporalities work in co-constitutive relation with socio-material dynamics (Ramakrishnan et al., 2021): while the mientras tanto was perceived as a problem to overcome in several instances (Fainstein, 2020), many residents transformed it into a cry for action, adopting a political strategy that aimed at reversing the long state of immobility. As a result, it is possible to detect the making of a flammable city in Dock Sud, where *flammable* refers, on the one hand, to the stubborn demand by residents for a safe and dignified urban space, and, on the other, to the persistent and still largely unresolved environmental suffering in the area. It is a city in which, regardless of the harsh circumstances, the potential for transformative urban struggles seems always poised to take shape. And the mientras tanto is its distinct temporality, which, despite being trapped in an indefinite and perhaps impossible determination – one made of a twofold negation: the impossibility of staying and the impossibility of leaving – nonetheless unleashes the potential for a radical urban presence. The mientras tanto, therefore, reveals the fragmented time–space of infrastructure, shedding light on its profoundly uneven socio-material dynamics and the related disputes that play out at the level of visualisations of time.

Moreover, while observing Dock Sud, one gets the impression that, in a contrasting modality, 'infrastructure, and metonymically the economy and development itself, becomes futurity and deferral at once' (Appel, 2018: 53). Such a kind of temporal dysfunction is generated by the problematic – and possibly unbearable – encounter between the materialities of global capital, the environments where it lands, and the needs of local communities. As a result, Dock Sud can be associated with the proliferation of 'extreme territories' that mushroom within and sustain contemporary urban space (Urban Theory Lab, n.d.). As

Appel (2018: 48) underlined in her study on temporalities, 'officials justified roads before water, airports before electricity, as a strategy to stimulate the economic growth that would, in a deferred future, enable public infrastructural provisioning', and this is a recurring landscape in infrastructure space, which can aptly describe the unfolding of Dock Sud's materialities. Through this analysis, the article seeks to encourage further discussion on the variegated, often opaque, and highly contradictory urban worlds emerging from large-scale infrastructure operations.

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Notes

1. In Argentina, the term *villa* (derived from *villa miseria*) refers to a shantytown. In this text, I will indicate Villa Inflamable as a 'shantytown' and 'settlement' interchangeably (and I will translate *barrio* as 'neighbourhood' when the residents used that word in the interviews) to underline Villa Inflamable's heterogeneous socio-spatial and material composition (a helpful reflection on this terminology is provided by Massidda, 2023). For the same reason, also mirrored in the hybrid legal structure of Villa Inflamable, I will avoid using the formal/informal division – according to which, for example, shantytown refers to informal settlements (e.g. see Huchzermeyer, 2019) – and will instead employ the adjective 'precarious' when referring to shantytown-like environments.
2. Shell sold its Argentina's downstream activities to the Raízen – a joint venture between Shell (50%) and the Brazilian Cosan (50%) – in 2018 (La Nación, 2018).
3. The construction of the 1200 houses would be never be completed.
4. The verb 'to urbanise' [*urbanizar*] (along with related terms such as 'urbanisation of' [*urbanización de*], 'urbanised' [*urbanizado/a*], etc.) – beyond its general meaning in English – is used by state and municipal authorities in Argentina to refer to interventions that provide precarious settlements with basic services such as, for example, potable water, electricity, sewage systems, and the regularisation of land tenure (e.g. see Clemente, 2019).
5. Such a temporal division is principally analytical. While the municipality's decision was taken after new studies declared the absence of dangerous pollution in the soil (Ministerio Público de la Defensa, n.d.), residents have kept fighting for their basic needs (therefore continuing the practice of mientras tanto despite the change of context), also saying that several of their requests about safety – such as a thorough study of air quality – have still largely remained unanswered. At the same time, as we are going to see, the overall state of waiting, although framed differently, was already present in Villa Inflamable before the developments of the Mendoza Case.
6. Interestingly, this term has been also used by Fainstein (2020) to analyse the general situation in the Matanza – Riachuelo basin after ACUMAR's programme of relocation in 2010. In that work, Fainstein (2020: 185), offers a view of the problematic relationship between juridical time and residents' time, showing – to a certain extent akin to this article – how the latter's waiting was nonetheless 'active'.

7. ASIJ (*Asociación Civil por la Igualdad de la Justicia*) is a non-governmental association of lawyers whose purpose is to defend the rights of the most vulnerable groups in Argentina.

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