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Los Angeles

More Than a Home:
Dwelling, Place, and Poverty
In Rural Uruguay

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Geography

by

Samuel Brandt

2024

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2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

More Than a Home:
Dwelling, Place, and Poverty
In Rural Uruguay

by

Samuel Brandt

Doctor of Philosophy in Geography

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Stephen Andrew Bell, chair

How do you house the rural poor at a national scale? This question drove one of the most audacious social policies in late-twentieth century Latin America. *More Than a Home: Dwelling, Place, and Poverty in Rural Uruguay* is a historical, ethnographic, and policy-oriented account of the origins, evolution, and impact of Uruguay's Movement for the Eradication of Unhealthy Rural Housing (MEVIR). Guided by the slogan, "To see it rain from inside without getting wet", MEVIR was founded in 1967 to provide dignified living for rural laborers residing in precarious mud and straw dwellings. A parastatal institution premised on mutual aid construction, MEVIR has since built over 33,000 homes and exists in nearly every small town across Uruguay. A *sui generis* effort to bring housing policy, urban planning, formal homeownership, and a sense of community to remote

areas, MEVIR keeps the rural working poor rooted in places they call home and away from informal settlements on the periphery of cities. In the predominantly urban field of social housing, MEVIR is a rare case of best practices in a rural setting. *More Than a Home* draws on twenty-two months of fieldwork in Uruguay, including analysis of archival documents on MEVIR's founding, observation of the MEVIR office and MEVIR field sites, and interviews of over forty actors involved in MEVIR throughout its history. Three factors explain MEVIR's sustained effectiveness: a clear objective to serve a specific geographical context, a methodology of policy implementation as a process of social growth, and a sensitivity to the scales and places where it operates. As my travels to all nineteen departments (first-level administrative divisions) of Uruguay with MEVIR technicians illustrate, MEVIR vindicates the power of geographic knowledge.

The dissertation of Samuel Brandt is approved.

William R. Summerhill III

John A. Agnew

Adam D. Moore

Stephen Andrew Bell, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

Table of Contents

Introduction: An Unsung Tool for the Improvement of Rural Lives	1
MEVIR AS OBJECTIVE	
Chapter One: A Nation’s Improver: Alberto Gallinal and the Creation of MEVIR	26
The Longue Durée Presence of “Rat Towns”	26
The Historiography of Alberto Gallinal	33
Gallinal’s Many Hats	38
Four Foundational Experiences	47
Gallinal’s Vision for MEVIR	50
Vision into Action	54
Conclusion: Gallinal as an Author of Place	59
Chapter Two: “Mutar sin perder su esencia”: An Institutional History of MEVIR	61
A Chronological History	61
MEVIR During the Dictatorship	61
A Return to Democracy and the Leadership of Mieres (1985-2003)	64
The Death of Mieres and the Ascendancy of the Frente Amplio	74
A Return to Blanco Leadership	84
A Thematic History	88
An Office Workplace	88
Construction Sites	97
Urbanism	100
Politics	103
Financing	107
Selection and Research	108
MEVIR’s Expansion of its Offerings in a “New Rurality”	111
Evaluating MEVIR’s Evolution	119
MEVIR AS METHOD	
Chapter Three: “Sinónimo de la alegría”: Preparing a Place	123
Territorial Investigations	124
Strategic Planning	126
Land Acquisition	141
The Territorial Investigation Update Tour	142
Announcements	167
Meeting with Local Actors	170
Distributing Flyers	197

The Call for Applicants	202
Sign-Up Days	203
Selection	209
Preparation for Construction	217
The Launch of Construction	218
Conclusion	220
Chapter Four:	221
“El objetivo primordial”: Building a Place Together	
Introducing the Obra	221
The Obra in Time and Space	228
A Cast of Characters	234
Participants	234
The Foreman and Skilled Construction Workers	236
Social Workers and Architects	248
Purchasing and Supplies	255
Visits to the Obra in Capilla del Sauce	260
Chapter Five:	323
Beyond the Obra: Keeping Tabs on a Place	
Continued Contact between Participants and MEVIR	324
The Reassignment of Vacated Homes	332
Preparation for Deed Signing	347
Signing the Deeds	372
Summoning MEVIR’s Expertise and Reputation for Other Building Projects	388
Ceremonial and Symbolic Functions Not Connected to Building	398
Conclusion:	408
MEVIR Beyond Uruguay?	
Bibliography	422

List of Figures

Figure 1	Map of Uruguay for the reader’s reference (source: CIA, 1995).	1
Figure 2	MEVIR homes in Cerro Chato, Treinta y Tres Department (photo by author, 20 July 2017).	4
Figure 3	Map of Uruguay’s population density, illustrating the sparse settlement of the countryside and the concentration of population in and around Montevideo (Source: Administración Nacional de Educación Pública, undated circa 2011).	10
Figure 4	This map was displayed by MEVIR at the institution’s stand at the 2024 <i>Fiesta Nacional del Pollo y de la Gallina</i> (National Chicken and Hen Festival) in San Bautista, Canelones. It shows the localities where MEVIR has built homes or other infrastructure as of December 2022. This map is almost inversely proportional to the map in Figure 3. The orange icons represent places where MEVIR has recently begun building homes made from wood (photo by author, 4 February 2024).	11
Figure 5	This postage stamp, on display in the MEVIR office, commemorates the institution’s fiftieth anniversary. It depicts the contrast between MEVIR homes and the insalubrious dwellings of mid-twentieth century rural Uruguay. These last often hosted the chagas disease-carrying <i>vinchuca</i> bug (photo by author, 25 October 2022).	30
Figure 6	August 1971 photograph of Alberto Gallinal in Pueblo Celeste, Salto Department (image courtesy of Rosario Bisio and the <i>Grupo de Vecinos de Nuevo Valentín</i>).	33
Figure 7	These prototype homes built in Cerro Colorado in the mid-1960s helped to convince Alberto Gallinal of the viability of the idea that became MEVIR (photo by author, 1 July 2022).	44
Figure 8	The wood homes, on the left, under construction in Las Flores, Rivera Department, represent a shift from MEVIR’s traditional use of brick, seen in the homes on the right, which were built in the late 1990s (photo by author, 19 January 2024).	86
Figure 9	A portrait of Alberto Gallinal, alongside portraits of MEVIR’s subsequent presidents, sits outside the meeting hall in the organization’s office that bears its founder’s name (photo by author, 16 April 2024).	90
Figure 10	The <i>planilla de obras</i> , a chart of planned and active construction works, is a frequent sight at the MEVIR office (photo by author, 4 May 2022).	92

Figure 11	Each MEVIR home bears a plaque with the organization’s ovenbird (<i>hornero</i>) logo. Each house also receives a number, situating it historically in the chronological order in which MEVIR homes have been built. These plaques are symbolic of how MEVIR has evolved. On the left is a hand-painted hornero from the early 1970s in Sacachispas, Soriano Department (photo by author, 17 July 2022). On the right is a stack of horneros ready to be placed on new homes in Capilla del Sauce, Florida Department (photo by author, 13 September 2022).	102
Figure 12	This time series of maps depicts Uruguay’s rural land use regions in 1990, 2000, and 2011. Many areas once devoted to sheep ranching (beige) and cattle ranching (shades of green) have given way to agroforestry (brown). A significant rise in grain crops (red) has occurred in the southwest of the country (source: Ministerio de Ganadería, Agricultura y Pesca, 2015).	111-112
Figure 13	Figure 13: From left to right, selection director Victoria Morena, research director Yamila Meseguez, and planning director Cristina Sienna discuss the boundaries of a plan in Paso Campamento, Artigas at a strategic planning meeting (photo by author, 14 June 2022).	127
Figure 14	The architect Alejandro Plada (with his hand on the map) and the social worker Margarita Lasarte (to his left) interview local actors at Rural School # 60 in Cerro Chato, Tacuarembó Department. Only after forty-five minutes do the MEVIR technicians begin to ask about housing (photo by author, 8 July 2022).	151
Figure 15	Prospective participants line up outside the Club Social Casupá in Casupá, Florida Department as they wait to be interviewed by MEVIR social workers (photo by author, 22 April 2022).	204
Figure 16	Being selected in a lottery to participate in MEVIR elicits an embrace of joy. Castillos, Rocha Department (photo by author, 14 March 2022).	214
Figure 17	Google Maps aerial photo of Capilla del Sauce. The fourth MEVIR nucleus, completed in 2022, is to the northeast. The three previous nuclei lie west of Ruta 6, the main north-south road.	261
Figure 18	The architect Federico Becerra (white hard hat) and the skilled construction worker Miguel Ojeda (yellow hard hat) work with a participant on his planta urbana home in Capilla del Sauce (photo by author, 7 April 2022).	264

Figure 19	Participants in Capilla del Sauce choose a name for their neighborhood. The social worker Silvia Cuello (in the middle) facilitates (photo by author, 15 August 2022).	283
Figure 20	Participants in Capilla del Sauce react to finding out which home will be theirs (photo by author, 1 September 2022).	288
Figure 21	From left to right, the social worker Silvia Cuello and the agronomists Carlos Torres and Alfredo Irureta instruct participants in Capilla del Sauce on tree planting (photo by author, 13 September 2022).	294
Figure 22	Outside the Club Social Capilla del Sauce, participants await the social worker Silvia Cuello (carrying suitcase) before an assembly (photo by author, 13 September 2022).	297
Figure 23	View of the obra in Capilla del Sauce a month before completion (photo by author, 13 September 2022).	301
Figure 24	The social worker Silvia Cuello leads participants in a game to help them identify and process feelings in advance of moving into their homes (photo by author, 3 October 2022).	303
Figure 25	MEVIR participants and community members ride on horseback on their way to the inauguration of homes in Capilla del Sauce (photo by author, 14 October 2022).	315
Figure 26	MEVIR president Juan Pablo Delgado (gray suit) congratulates a family in Capilla del Sauce on receiving the keys to their MEVIR home (photo by author, 14 October 2022).	318
Figure 27	No MEVIR inauguration is complete without a themed cake (photo by author, 14 October 2022).	320
Figure 28	MEVIR homes add a modicum of density to sparsely populated Isla Patrulla, Treinta y Tres Department (photo by author, 22 June 2022).	341
Figure 29	The social worker Elena Romero (left), and the notary Cristina Mastracusa help families prepare to sign the deeds for their MEVIR homes in Cerro Chato, Paysandú Department (photo by author, 6 September 2022).	363
Figure 30	This Google Maps aerial view of Cerro Chato, Paysandú shows an example of a town whose housing stock is mostly homes in MEVIR nuclei (in the southeast corner). Note the predominance of agroforestry plantations flanking the town.	368

Figure 31	This 2020 map shows the percentage of households by department that live below the poverty line (source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Encuesta Nacional de Hogares).	370
Figure 32	Leonel and Orfilia, participants in Paso de Pache, Canelones Department, celebrate signing their deed. They show a picture of Orfilia at the inauguration of homes in the late 1990s (photo by author, 30 May 2022).	376
Figure 33	To the left is a MEVIR home built after the 2016 tornado in Dolores, Soriano Department. To the right is a nearby home built after the same disaster by a company called Schmidt (photo by author, 6 September 2022).	394
Figure 34	At the Expo Prado, Uruguay’s annual agricultural exposition, held in Montevideo, a teacher from a one-room schoolhouse in Durazno Department gives a speech about a prize her students won in a MEVIR-sponsored drawing competition. Robert Silva, Uruguay’s highest-ranking official in K-12 education congratulates the teacher and her students (photo by author, 12 September 2022).	406
Figure 35	Motivational inscriptions like this one line the exterior walls of San Pedro de Timote, Alberto Gallinal’s estancia in Florida Department (photo by author, 1 July 2022).	421

List of Tables

Table 1	Field technicians as a proportion of all non-construction worker employees (derived from Garcé 2017, p. 14)	77
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The academy, the field, and friends and family are the three main spheres of my life. Each sphere is anchored around a set of individuals and a set of places, but they do show considerable overlap. Any omissions below are my responsibility.

THE ACADEMY

My advisor Stephen Bell has been generous, professional, and responsive. He has also allowed me considerable creative license. Our shared commitment to the importance of geography and area studies within the academy has been a common thread in our working relationship, and these convictions about place lie at the heart of this manuscript. A contingent of Brazilian guests sponsored by Stephen Bell has been a highlight of my graduate tenure. Sandro Dutra e Silva, Samira Moretto, and Anderson Schmitt are intellectual collaborators and true “*amigos do coração*”.

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UCLA alone does not constitute the academy. In Uruguay, I have long been well received by academics. In 2022, despite my demanding schedule of *jornadas* with MEVIR technicians, and my immersion into the MEVIR office, I was able to “escape” occasionally to the twice-monthly seminar of the Program in Economic and Social History at the Udelar’s Faculty of Social Sciences. Led by Jorge Álvarez and Juan Pablo Martí, this seminar provided a rich space for discussion. I also owe Jorge Álvarez gratitude for supplying a letter of support when I applied for the DDRA. A June 2022 weekend field trip around Treinta y Tres Department with students and instructors of the Geography Department of the Udelar’s Faculty of Sciences was enjoyable and informative. I thank Gustavo Cánepa for the invitation.

My undergraduate institution, the University of Chicago, will forever loom large in my trajectory. Michael Conzen, Dain Borges, and Sarah Lynn Lopez have all given valuable advice and written letters of support for me. The late Marvin Mikesell, with whom I took multiple courses, has arguably done more than anyone to orient my view of academic geography.

Between finishing at Chicago and starting the first Fulbright grant in Uruguay in 2014, I enjoyed a productive sojourn in Leeds, Yorkshire, England with BaumanLyons Architects researching case studies of socially-conscious architecture around the world. I am certain I would

not have gravitated towards MEVIR as a topic so emphatically were it not for the many conversations with Irena Bauman, Maurice Lyons, Tom Vigar, and Sam Wilson in the BaumanLyons office and at pubs in LS7.

My visit to Paris along Fall 2023 was graciously hosted by the geographer Sébastien Velut of the Center for Research and Documentation on the Americas (CREDA). In Madrid, my gratitude is due to Emiliano Travieso and María Sol Lanteri for arranging presentations of this project at the Universidad Carlos III and the Universidad de Alcalá respectively. I am also grateful to Adrián Gustavo Zarrilli of the Universidad Nacional de Quilmes in Argentina, and to Alec Murphy of the University of Oregon for facilitating talks that I have given on MEVIR.

THE FIELD

My first week in Uruguay in 2014, I met two of the people who have been among the most important to me as friends and as facilitators of my research along the last decade, Cecilia Ituño, the host of my first Airbnb, and Patricia Vargas, who heads the Uruguayan Fulbright Commission. One contact introduced to me by Patricia was Aldo Rodríguez, who generously let me accompany him on three multi-day trips to rural schools in 2022, during which I was able to visit many MEVIR plans.

Later in 2014, I made a number of friends while living in Cerro Chato and also getting to know the other towns along Ruta 7. This area became my own “*pago*” or “*patria chica*” within Uruguay. I am indebted to individuals including Marcos Hernández, Tamara González, Nacho Silvera, Manuel Chotola, Macarena Vaccaro, Gabriel Morosini, Jonathan Tejeda, Mauricio Ifrán, Laura Gramoso, María de los Ángeles Álvarez, María del Huerto Lago, Nancy Osvalde, Silvina Noblía, Johana and Caty Giles, Loana Márquez, Silvana Sampayo, Miriam Moreira, Felipe

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My preliminary dissertation fieldwork consisted mainly of consulting documents at the Archivo General de la Nación. There, I benefitted from the assistance and the patience of the reading room staff, and from the informal banter with the *porteros* Walter, Miles, and Nelson. In 2017, I also made preliminary visits to the MEVIR office, where I was well received by Yanina Aniotz, Luis Silvera, and Jorge Bertullo. These conversations provided me with material assisting my writing of subsequent research proposals.

I hope the enthusiasm with which MEVIR received me in 2022 is evident in this manuscript. All of the individuals connected to MEVIR who I mentioned in the thesis deserve my thanks on account of their time and insight. A few special thanks are necessary.

Juan Pablo Delgado and his executive secretaries Claudia Crivocapich and Anacela Gómez set the tone early on by making me feel included and assuring me access to the information and their colleagues that would best enrich my project. They have also kindly provided a workspace for me in the MEVIR office.

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In early 2022, Daniel García Trovero gave me a clear overview of how the organization was structured so that I could make my interviews more systematic. An anthropologist by training, his own interest in my work has enriched my approach.

Federico Becerra and Silvia Cuello feature prominently in Chapter Four. My utmost respect for them as technicians and my delight in their company on the road and on the obra should be more than clear from the manuscript. Moreover, at every step, they not only made me feel welcome, but went above and beyond to help answer my questions and to introduce me to people, places, and ideas that could serve my research.

Camila Echeguía, Alfredo Guasque, and Leonardo Castro are three MEVIR employees who do not figure frequently in the text. They have nevertheless been vital to me making sense of the institution, and more importantly to me having a good time, whether it be in Montevideo, the interior, and even on trips to Uruguay's neighbors. The significance will never be lost on me that I met Camila and Alfredo on a MEVIR-chartered bus to an inauguration of homes in Cardal, Florida. Though they may spend little time on obras, these three individuals exemplify MEVIR's spirit of solidarity and *compañerismo*.

It is not just "fieldwork" per se that keeps me invested in Uruguay. Montevideo is a great place to live. This is especially true when you have people with whom to enjoy the city, not least its musical offerings. I would be remiss to not acknowledge the support of additional friends in the capital unconnected to MEVIR. Among these are Sebastián Rodríguez Merlo, Juani Caraballo, Andy Fayos, Nacho D'Angiolillo, Manuel Giménez, Pedro Demichelis, Pedro Maldini, Sebastián Artigas, Diego Norbis, and Alejandro Rivero.

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Also in Los Angeles, I have enjoyed greatly the extended hospitality of Phil and Sydney Nichols. Our mutual friends, fellow writers of a different sort, Martha Groves and Marissa Flaxbart inspire and challenge me with their flair for language.

On my domestic leisure travels, my uncles and aunts in Missouri, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Virginia have provided me with some of the few genuine periods of respite from the relentlessness of this eight-year journey.

In my hometown of Eugene, Oregon, I am lucky to have a broad community of friends who encourage me. Among them, I single out the influence of Rick Lindholm, a steadfast voice of reason. My interdisciplinary interest in Latin America began in earnest during my junior year in the International Baccalaureate program at South Eugene High School. That year consisted of an integrated curriculum approaching the Americas concurrently from the fields of economics, history, and literature. My thanks are due to my teachers Kyle Yamada, Craig Wiebe, and Pamela McCarty for making that time a formative and stimulating one.

Lastly, there is a great irony that while researching and writing about dwelling for nearly the last decade, I have hardly remained in one place for more than a year at a time. My flexibility as a scholar would not be possible without the stability provided to me by my parents at their home in Eugene. This was especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic. The companionship, support, and sincerity of my parents and my sister is the most essential piece of this puzzle.

Biographical Sketch

Samuel T. Brandt

EDUCATION

M.A. Geography	University of California, Los Angeles	2019
B.A. Geography (with honors)	University of Chicago	2013

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Peer-Reviewed Articles:

“[The Brazilian Scene: David Lowenthal, John Dos Passos, and the Importance of ‘Scene’ and Brazil to Geographic Inquiry](#)”. *Geographical Review*. v. 113 n. 2 (February 2023), 171-190.

2nd Prize, 2022 Andrew Hill Clark Award, AAG Historical Geography Specialty Group

“[The ‘Pastoral City-State’: A Metaphor for the Geography of Uruguay](#)”. *Journal of Latin American Geography*. v. 21 n. 1 (May 2022), 125-159.

1st Prize, 2023 Andrew Hill Clark Award, AAG Historical Geography Specialty Group

Book Reviews and Review Essays:

“[Tunisia: An Arab Anomaly](#)”. *AAG Review of Books* v. 9 n. 4 (October 2021), 35-38.

“[Hindrances of the Hinterland: Ranching in Robert Wilcox’s Mato Grosso](#)”. *Historia Ambiental Latinoamericana y Caribeña (HALAC)* v. 10 n. 3 (December 2020), 366-370.

Magazine and Newspaper Articles:

El País (Uruguay), “[Túnez, un país espejo al otro lado del mundo](#)” (November 2017)

Semanario Búsqueda, “[Uruguay según los extranjeros](#)” (February 2016)

The Register-Guard, “[Pot, gay marriage barely make a stir in Uruguay](#)” (July 2015)

Roads and Kingdoms, “[The Raiders of Ruta 7](#)” (July 2015)

Lvblcity, “[Malmö: The Many Faces of the European City](#)” (June 2015)

IBWM, “[A cast of characters: Why la Celeste stands unique](#)” (February 2015)

SELECTED HONORS AND AWARDS

Extramural:

2023 European Rural History Organisation Student Conference Grant (€250)

2023 AAG Historical Geography Specialty Group Carville Earle Award (\$400)

2023 American Geographical Society Council Fellowship (\$2,000)

2020 Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Grant (\$38,000)

2020 Journal of Latin American Geography Field Study Award (\$1,575)

2013-2014 Fulbright U.S. Student (\$12,000)

2013 NCGE and AAG Award for Excellence of Scholarship in Geography

2007 AAA High School Travel Challenge National Champion (\$20,000)

2005 National Geographic Bee Third Place (\$10,000)

UCLA:

2023-2024 Dissertation Year Fellowship (\$20,000)

2023 International Institute Dissertation Fieldwork Fellowship (\$1,500)

2023 Center for European and Russian Studies Dissertation Research Fellowship (\$5,000)

2020 Latin American Institute Graduate Research Travel Award (\$2,500)
2019 Graduate Summer Research Mentorship (\$6,000)
2018-2019 Graduate Research Mentorship (\$20,000)

The University of Chicago:

2013 Chicago Careers in Public and Social Service Director's Grant (\$2,500)
2012 Nicholson Center for British Studies Undergraduate Travel Grant (\$2,500)
2012 Committee on Geographical Studies Ann Natunewicz Travel Grant (\$3,000)

SELECTED PRESENTATIONS

Conferences:

2023 European Rural History Organisation Conference, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
2023 Symposium of the Latin American and Caribbean Society of Environmental History (SOLCHA), Morelia, Mexico
2023 American Society for Environmental History (ASEH) Environmental History Week, virtual
2023 American Association of Geographers (AAG) Annual Meeting, Denver, CO, USA
2023 Conference of Latin American Geographers, virtual
2021 SOLCHA Symposium, virtual
2021 ASEH Environmental History Week, virtual
2021 AAG Annual Meeting, virtual
2018 Congress of the Latin American Association of Rural Sociology, Montevideo, Uruguay
2018 International Congress on History, Regions, and Frontiers, Passo Fundo, Brazil
2018 International Symposium of Environmental History and Migrations, Florianópolis, Brazil
2017 SOLCHA Postgraduate School, Anápolis, Brazil

Invited Talks

2024 University of Oregon Geography Colloquium, Eugene, OR, USA
2024 Fulbright Commission Uruguay, Montevideo, Uruguay
2023 Figuerola Institute of Economic History, Department of Social Sciences, Carlos III University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain
2023 Institute for Research in Latin American Studies, University of Alcalá, Madrid, Spain
2022 Geography Department, Sciences Faculty, University of the Republic, Montevideo, Uruguay
2022 University of Northern Iowa Geography Colloquium, virtual
2019 Environmental History Laboratory of the Cerrado, UniEVANGÉLICA, Anápolis, Brazil
2018 Center for the Study of Rural Argentina (CEAR), National University of Quilmes, Quilmes, Argentina
2018 Environmental History Laboratory, Federal University of the Southern Border (UFFS), Chapecó, Brazil
2014 Wolverhampton City Archives, Wolverhampton, UK
2014 Birmingham City University School of the Built Environment, Birmingham, UK

Workshop Presentations

2023 Center for Research and Documentation on the Americas (CREDA), Sorbonne-Nouvelle University, Paris, France
2022 Economic and Social History Program, Social Sciences Faculty, University of the Republic, Montevideo, Uruguay
2020 UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs Latin American Cities Working Group
2014 University of Manchester Centre for Urban Resilience and Energy, Manchester, UK

Introduction:

An Unsung Tool for the Improvement of Rural Lives



Figure 1: Map of Uruguay for the reader's reference (source: CIA, 1995).

Omnipresent yet Invisible

Most visitors to Uruguay never leave a short strip along the Río de la Plata and the Atlantic Coast. This is not entirely to their detriment. The capital city of Montevideo is a

pedestrian's delight, architecturally stunning, and full of cultural offerings. The beaches due east offer their own charms: some appeal to families with young children, others to retirees, others to backpackers, and yet others welcome an international jet set looking for partying and fine dining. The other direction from the capital, the cobblestone streets and whitewashed colonial-era buildings make Colonia del Sacramento a pleasant day trip via ferry from Buenos Aires, an outing that immerses the history lover in the struggle for territory between the Spanish and Portuguese Empires. But one of Uruguay's most remarkable sites is hardly visible from the highways that connect Montevideo to Colonia and the beaches.

If you are driving from Montevideo to Colonia, look closely to your right as Ruta 1 meets Camino Tomkinson. If you are lucky, you will notice a giant white shed with the letters "MEVIR" painted on the side.¹ Glanced fleetingly as you zoom onward, this must seem rather innocuous: yet another warehouse or factory on the fringes of the city. Such details are usually as lost on *montevideanos* (denizens of the capital) as they are foreign visitors to Uruguay. Mention MEVIR to a *montevideano*, and revelations of any prior notion of what it is are usually rather vague. If not intimately familiar with the Uruguayan interior, these five letters probably mean little to you. For *montevideanos*, roughly half of Uruguay's 3.5 million people, inland Uruguay is as foreign to them as it is to foreigners. By and large, when they leave the city, they go to the beach or abroad. More to Miami, less to Melo. More to Paris, less to Paysandú.

Until 2020, when its new administration added a sign on what was previously an unmarked office building façade in downtown Montevideo, the letters on the warehouse were the only thing MEVIR had done to mark its presence verbally in Uruguay's more visited areas. Yet, if you travel in Uruguay beyond the narrow coastal strip, MEVIR soon becomes conspicuous, or

¹ MEVIR is pronounced with the stress on the second syllable. To English speakers, this sounds something like "may-VEER".

at least as visible as it can be in the countryside of a nation where cows outnumber people almost four to one.

This I found out on my first trip to Uruguay. I arrived in Montevideo in March of 2014 with a Fulbright U.S. Student Grant and a blank slate for nine months of research. After two months of acquainting myself with the capital and making various contacts, I moved to Cerro Chato (pop. 3,227). This small town lies five hours by bus from Montevideo and it happens to be the first place in Latin America where women voted. Though the 1927 plebiscite is more than a tidbit of political and feminist history (in Cerro Chato, there is a museum that does a great job of placing this singular event in its historical context), it was not my main motive for showing up deep in the interior of Uruguay. I was fascinated by the fact that Cerro Chato and many similar towns across Uruguay were founded because of the building of railways in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and yet these once-important pieces of infrastructure largely ceased to operate by the end of the 1980s. I wondered what life was like in these places where trains no longer came through, and what, in particular, had become of their abandoned stations? One form of built intervention, railway infrastructure, brought me to deep Uruguay in the first place, but another ultimately captured my attention: MEVIR. And it has kept me coming back.

Driving from Montevideo to Cerro Chato through ranching country on Ruta 7 is a much different experience than navigating the endless belt of summer and weekend homes along the *Interbalnearia*, the highway running east from Montevideo that parallels the coastline. Ruta 7 also contrasts with a trip west on Ruta 1 from Montevideo to Colonia del Sacramento through prosperous dairy and grain country. Ruta 7 is neither a divided highway nor one making a straight and comfortable path from point A to point B. Driving requires close attention to a series of challenges, including potholes, logging trucks, speedbumps, and sharp curves. Jorge Nasser, a

major Uruguayan singer and composer, noted these last two in his eponymous *milonga* (a type of folk song native to the region and one related to tango), about the road. Ruta 7 mostly parallels a railway line that no longer carries passenger traffic and only sparingly sees a freight train (usually one carrying rice from Río Branco on the Brazilian border to the port of Montevideo). On account of the railway, there are towns around every 25 kilometers; these towns were established around a station in order to provide convenient places for the shipment of livestock to the port of Montevideo.



Figure 2: MEVIR homes in Cerro Chato, Treinta y Tres Department (photo by author, 20 July 2017).

In 2014, each time I rode the bus between Montevideo and Cerro Chato (there are five busses per day), I was struck by a recurring sight in these towns: groups of small one-story houses set neatly in rows and well-maintained. In Cerro Chato, these houses were impossible to ignore, since they comprise most of the housing stock in the half of town east of the railway track. They were identifiable by their general size and shape, but also by a tile next to the door containing a number, a drawing of a bird, and the acronym “MEVIR”.

As I came to know people in Cerro Chato and nearby towns on Ruta 7 such as Tupambaé and José Batlle y Ordóñez, MEVIR continued to make a strong impression on me through what I saw and heard. People who lived in MEVIR homes expressed their pride, joy, and comfort in having them. And those who did not reside in MEVIR homes expressed a similar pride that this institution had improved their town. If they did not live in a MEVIR home, chances were a relative or close friend did. It seemed to me at the outset that MEVIR's impact was decidedly positive at the scale of families, towns, and the country as a whole. This cumulative series of observations and conversations showed me just how important MEVIR was to rural Uruguay. Here was a housing program for poor people that was neither stigmatized, nor ghettoized, but rather a near-universal object of affection. Yet neither in the reading I did when preparing to come to Uruguay, nor in my conversations with academics and journalists in Montevideo (even when I mentioned my intention to live and work in a small town), did the subject of MEVIR ever arise.

This contradiction between outside perception (or the lack thereof) of places and the reality on the ground is one of the main reasons why I became fascinated with MEVIR. I spent the remainder of 2014 living in Cerro Chato documenting daily life in the town largely through volunteering at the high school. The high school was also my ticket to trips around the rest of the country. In all, I visited eighteen of nineteen *departamentos*, or departments (Uruguay's first-level administrative divisions), missing only Artigas in the far-northwest of the country. Through these observations and travels, no shortage of topics popped out to me as candidates for future research. When I returned to the United States in 2015 and pondered these topics as I applied for graduate programs to continue my studies in geography, MEVIR rose to the top.

I felt compelled to study MEVIR precisely because of the *positive* impact it has had. Coming from an urban studies background where so many of the case studies were about what *not* to do, I wanted to tell a success story, and one that had practical implications for best practices in how housing is provided, far beyond Uruguay. MEVIR elicits so many questions I knew I would have fun trying to answer: Who lives in the homes? How have the homes changed the lives of their residents? How are the homes built? How are the homes funded? Why are the homes built in some places and not others? How have the homes changed over time? How were these homes made possible in the first place? And above all, why are the homes so highly regarded? So, what exactly then is MEVIR?

Nuts and Bolts

How do you house the rural poor at a national scale? This question drove one of the most audacious social policies in twentieth-century Latin America. Guided by the slogan, “To see it rain from inside without getting wet”, MEVIR, short for *Movimiento Pro Erradicación de la Vivienda Insalubre Rural* (Movement for the Eradication of Unhealthy Rural Housing) was founded in 1967 to provide dignified living for rural laborers, many of whom who had previously resided in precarious dwellings, often made of mud and straw. Over more than five decades, MEVIR, a parastatal entity, has built over 33,000 homes and it today exists in almost every small across in Uruguay. It combines mutual aid between participants during construction and a path to homeownership following twenty years of rent payments. By providing housing mostly in towns of 5,000 people or fewer and in dispersed rural areas, MEVIR serves as a brake on rural-to urban migration, keeping people rooted in the places they call home and away from informal settlements on the outskirts of cities.

As the title of this study, *More Than a Home*, implies, MEVIR's aims are not simply to house people. It pursues a more holistic vision of development, one aimed at improving economic production, social-well-being, and the surrounding environment. As stated on its website and often paraphrased in events by its officials, MEVIR sees housing as "one element in a complex system where various factors act in a balanced way: territory, the production of goods and services, the human being in community, community services, and physical infrastructures." This attitude is true in both modalities through which MEVIR builds homes: *núcleos*, or groups of nucleated homes in a new neighborhood achieved through mutual aid for families lacking property, and *terreno propio* homes, which are individual homes for working families who own property, but do not have sufficient capital with which to build a new home or to remodel their current one. Most of MEVIR's work has been done in nuclei.² The idea of MEVIR building more than homes is also true in a literal sense. The first MEVIR nucleus built in most towns includes a community center. Moreover, MEVIR often builds other infrastructure vital to a neighborhood such as playgrounds and police stations. Furthermore, MEVIR has a program *Unidades Productivas* (Productive Units) which builds infrastructure to improve production capacity for small-scale rural producers, notably milk yards.

One major reason for MEVIR's continuity over more than five decades is that it has never built beyond its means. A drawback to this prudence is that demand for MEVIR homes exceeds the supply. This means that when MEVIR decides to come to a locale, the process for becoming one of its participants is competitive. Through a board appointed by Uruguay's

² As of June 2022, 25,664 of the homes MEVIR has built have been in *núcleos*. The remaining 6,186 homes were built on *terreno propio*, or land owned by the participant families. 1,541 of MEVIR's *terreno propio* homes are in the *planta urbana*, meaning within the existing street plan of a town, and 4,645 are in the *area rural*, or rural areas outside of a town (MEVIR – Evaluación y Monitoreo (2022, p. 2). MEVIR's application of *terreno propio* solutions has accelerated considerably over the last decade (see Chapter Two).

Ministerio de Vivienda y Ordenamiento Territorial (Ministry of Housing and Spatial Planning), or MVOT, MEVIR makes this decision of where and when to build largely considering three factors: fairness (i.e., how long it has been since MEVIR last built in that locale), land prices, and demand for housing based on studies MEVIR has conducted. When MEVIR comes to a town, they set a series of parameters under which families are eligible (see Chapter Three for more on this). Eligible families apply to MEVIR after filling out paperwork and doing a short interview with a MEVIR social worker. A team of social workers then decides, based on criteria including income, current housing situation, and family dynamics, which families are selected to participate. The chosen families then work together for up to eighteen months to build the houses through sweat equity. They do this under the guidance of a team of skilled construction workers, as well as the supervision of an architect and a social worker, all employees of MEVIR. Families are expected to contribute 24 hours of construction work per week per adult throughout the duration of the project.

As a parastatal organization, MEVIR has a unique financing scheme, taking advantage of fiscal and purchasing exemptions that organizations more deeply embedded in the state cannot. It subsidizes between 60 and 90 percent of the cost of homes, using as its finance sources a combination of MVOT's National Housing Fund, taxes on agricultural exports, the national budget, and the occasional donation or bequest of land. There is one distinctive tax MEVIR has used since its outset. It levies one dollar on every thousand dollars by value of livestock exported. Placing this in a global perspective, every bite of an Uruguayan steak eaten a steakhouse in Amsterdam, Dubai, or Beijing has a role in making MEVIR possible. Residents pay the remaining cost to MEVIR both in the form of sweat equity and in monthly rent payments. They pay rents for approximately the next twenty years until the title changes hands

from MEVIR to the families. Thus, MEVIR has elements of a welfare program, but one demanding considerable sacrifice and discipline in return. This sacrifice is a double-edged sword. A majority of families do sign their deeds at a ceremony just over two decades after moving in, but a more than trivial number of families either abandon their homes (usually due to changing life circumstances) or fail to make the necessary payments, and remain renters.

As an organization delivering its policies reliably, meeting its promises both on time and within planned budgets, MEVIR is a political gold mine. Presidents of Uruguay are frequent guests at ribbon-cutting ceremonies, and departmental *intendentes* (akin to mayors or governors) would not dare miss such events.³ MVOT and the government at large have called upon MEVIR on account of its expertise and cachet to execute various projects that fall outside of the organization's normal purview. At a recent inauguration of homes, President Luis Lacalle Pou called MEVIR "an extract of the best of the Uruguayan people."

A total of 33,000 homes and counting may not seem such an impressive statistic. This amounts to around three percent of Uruguay's national population. However, this is a truly significant result for rural Uruguay. This is a country of 3.5 million, one where half of the population lives in and around the capital, and most of the other half reside in the capitals of the departments or in beach towns.⁴ Demographically speaking, the number of people who reside in

³ The executive power of each department is called the *intendencia*, which headed by an *intendente* who is popularly elected, and who serves a term of five years. Unlike the president of Uruguay's national government, intendentes can serve two consecutive terms.

⁴ For most of its history, Uruguay had no second-level administrative divisions beneath the nineteen departments. As such, it belonged to a select group of countries mostly made up of small-island nations like Grenada and microstates such as Liechtenstein. A law was passed in 2009, and implemented the next year, that authorized the creation of municipalities, of which there are now 127. Promoters of the law point to its ability to decentralize the provision of basic services, such as trash collection. However, the law's detractors are many. While the leadership of *municipios* is chosen in elections, these municipalities constitute an extremely weak form of government. Among the criticisms of *municipios* are the near complete subordination of budgets and decision making to the national and departmental governments. Municipalities exist on the map and on the ballot, but their function is almost exclusively a symbolic one. Nonetheless, they are useful to MEVIR as elected *alcaldes* (mayors) and *concejales* (councilors) provide important local contacts in remote areas. Not all areas in Uruguay fall within the bounds a municipality.

MEVIR homes exceeds the population of most of Uruguay's nineteen departments. In most of the places where MEVIR builds, it is synonymous with social housing, as MVOT's programs are more urban focused. In the most out-of-the-way places, MEVIR is synonymous with housing period. Across the country, there are locales whose entire housing stock was built by MEVIR. Especially in these remote places, having a home of your own, means having a MEVIR home. This means not just having a roof over your head but living in a well-built and dignified dwelling.

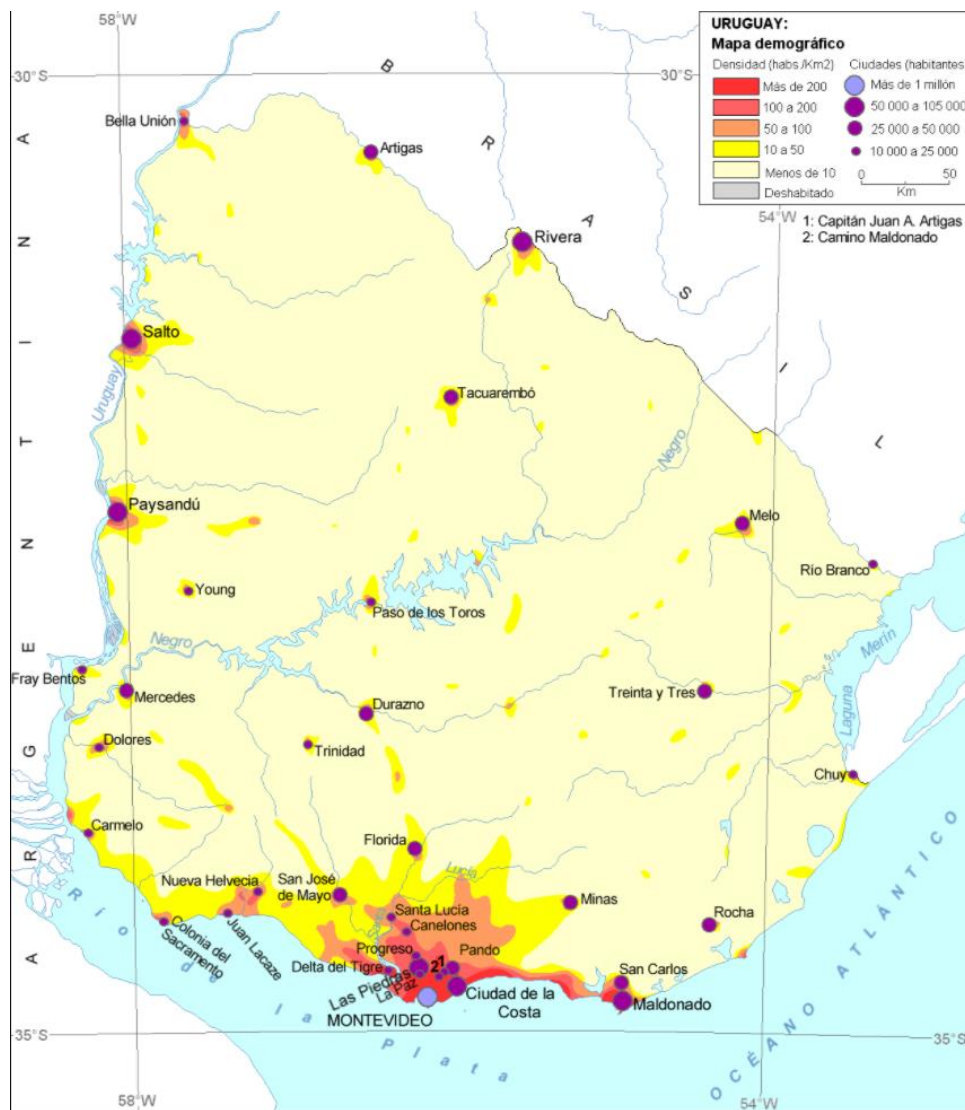


Figure 3: Map of Uruguay's population density, illustrating the sparse settlement of the countryside and the concentration of population in and around Montevideo (Source: Administración Nacional de Educación Pública, undated circa 2011).



Figure 4: This map was displayed by MEVIR at the institution’s stand at the 2024 *Fiesta Nacional del Pollo y de la Gallina* (National Chicken and Hen Festival) in San Bautista, Canelones. It shows the localities where MEVIR has built homes or other infrastructure as of December 2022. This map is almost inversely proportional to the map in Figure 3. The orange icons represent places where MEVIR has recently begun building homes made from wood (photo by author, 4 February 2024).

Literature Review

MEVIR's stability, ubiquity, and popularity set it apart from other social housing initiatives better known to scholars. Despite its prestige in rural Uruguay, the amount, content, and scope of writing on MEVIR is neither commensurate with the institution's actual domestic impact, nor its potential impact abroad.

Most writing on MEVIR only mentions the institution in passing, usually as a part of studies on rural life, housing policy, or poverty-reduction programs in Uruguay.⁵ The few scholarly or journalistic works that do take MEVIR as their primary object are helpful, but they are largely limited to studying certain aspects of the program rather than the institution as a whole. For example, two undergraduate theses from the Faculty of Social Sciences at Uruguay's *Universidad de la República* (University of the Republic), or UdelaR, use ethnographic fieldwork to make an important claim. They maintain a key factor in MEVIR's continuity and popularity is that the institution has gained trust from actual and potential participants across the country.⁶ Only one geographer has taken on MEVIR as an object of study, and the work resulting from this research was published twenty-five years ago.⁷

The most comprehensive work on MEVIR to date was actually commissioned by the organization itself. Nearing their fiftieth anniversary, MEVIR realized there had been very little reflection on the institution's evolution, so they commissioned Adolfo Garcé, a prominent Uruguayan political scientist, to write an overview in a special issue of MEVIR's magazine, *El Hornero* (see Chapter Five for more on *El Hornero*).⁸ Given the goal, Garcé's piece, while not

⁵ For example, see: Garabato and Ramada-Sarasola (2011), Ruocco (2014), and Magri (2016).

⁶ Cabrera Collazo (2015), and Cerrone and Barabadora (2015).

⁷ López Gallero et al. (1998).

⁸ Garcé (2017).

exactly hagiographic, is unsurprisingly not especially critical of MEVIR. Nevertheless, at least for readers of Spanish, it is the work most clearly laying out what MEVIR is, how it works and what it has done along its half century of existence. In 2023, following MEVIR's fifty-fifth anniversary, MEVIR commissioned the Uruguayan journalist Pablo Cohen to interview Uruguayan dignitaries about their experiences of working with MEVIR and their vision of the organization.⁹ At the launch of the book, presidents of Uruguay from three different parties were present, a testament to MEVIR's transcendence across political lines. While the book has a handful of valuable quotes that I cite in Chapter Three, Cohen's conversations inevitably descend into inside baseball about other aspects of Uruguayan politics, while straying from the matter ostensibly at hand: MEVIR.

Apart from Garcé and Cohen, most of the work on MEVIR shares a skeptical tone. While these studies are not ignorant of MEVIR's reach and continuity, they choose to center their analyses on the institution's shortcomings. For example, in a discussion of rural food sovereignty in Uruguay, one author applauds MEVIR for improving living arrangements, but then criticizes it for serving as a subsidy for cheap labor.¹⁰ Drawing neither on ethnographic research nor on any historical evaluation of MEVIR, Benjamín Nahoum (no relation to the eminent historian Benjamín Nahum) and Gustavo González use MEVIR as a facile rural counterpoint to advance their agenda for urban-centered cooperative housing.¹¹ Nahoum contends that while MEVIR has seen good physical and economic results due to its highly efficient technocratic management, well-trained staff, and low costs, it fails to fulfill the highest principles of self-help housing. It misses in his view because the implementation of homes in any given town is contingent on

⁹ Cohen (2023).

¹⁰ Oliver (2006).

¹¹ Nahoum (2012), González (2013).

prominent individuals bringing them there, rather than recipients organizing and advocating for themselves. As he puts it, “the difference between the MEVIR system and the cooperatives is the difference between ‘they gave us the housing’ and ‘we achieved the housing’.” Not only does Nahoum pass over the fact that organization and advocacy do not always equate with better outcomes than the decisions of prominent individuals, he also neglects to ask whether poor rural Uruguayans care who brought the housing so long as it was built. Instead, he simply assumes that rural laborers would rather live in a cooperative. González argues that the presence of MEVIR as the overwhelming form of social housing in rural areas has prevented cooperatives from effectively penetrating rural areas. Whether this is the case is beside the point. Both of these authors fail to ask whether residents are satisfied with their MEVIR homes and whether non-MEVIR social housing would appeal to the needs and lifestyle choices of the targeted populations.

Such critiques are warranted, especially when empirically grounded. However, this deluge of skepticism ignores the matter at hand. MEVIR is a novel and transformational program, one that has significantly improved the quality of life for tens of thousands of people and has earned the respect of countless more. In other words, authors have focused on second order effects of what MEVIR could do better in theory rather than the bigger picture of why MEVIR in practice has been for so many decades now such a potent and well-received force in rural Uruguay. More importantly, by speaking exclusively to an Uruguayan audience, these texts fail to put MEVIR in an international context. There is little recognition that MEVIR, let alone a MEVIR-like program, does not exist outside of Uruguay. Nor does it register that knowledge about how MEVIR works may be relevant to understanding housing and rural development policies elsewhere.

Why would such a ubiquitous and effective intervention be given such short shrift in the scholarship, both within Uruguay and as an international case study? I have a litany of hypotheses. First are factors internal to the Uruguayan academy. Research in Uruguay is poorly resourced. The funding that supported me to do fieldwork in Uruguay, devoting over a year of my life there solely to studying everything about MEVIR that I possibly could, is something generally unknown to scholars employed at Uruguayan universities. Geography, the discipline best suited to a holistic study of MEVIR, has a minimal presence in the Uruguayan academy compared with its neighboring countries, and not just in proportion to population.¹² Ideological reasons are also significant. Alberto Gallinal Heber, MEVIR's founder and longtime president until shortly before his death in 1994, supported, albeit critically, the 1980 plebiscite to continue Uruguay's civil-military dictatorship. The strong associations of Gallinal with right-wing politics persist to this day in some quarters of Uruguay, notably within an academy where left-wing thought is predominant.

A set of factors internal to the culture of Uruguay, and especially the rural sphere, also hold explanatory power. This was revealed so often by people's surprise when they found out I was writing about MEVIR. MEVIR is so deeply embedded rural culture. Hidden in plain sight, MEVIR is almost too quotidian for people to conceive of it as an object worth studying. People were also often surprised to learn MEVIR does not exist in some related form elsewhere, and that a program with its characteristics had not to my knowledge yet been implemented in other countries. In a middle-income country where people are much more likely to complain about how they are less well-off they are than those living in rich ones, rather than recognizing they are better off than many of their Latin American brethren, this inferiority complex leads people to

¹² Brandt (2022).

downplay their own virtues. Time and again, I could summarize received reactions as the following: “How odd that an American would come *here* to learn from *us*? I guess maybe Uruguay isn’t that mediocre after all.”

MEVIR’s lack of self-promotion has also inhibited the breadth and depth of writing about the organization. As MEVIR architect Federico Becerra summarizes, MEVIR is “a silent tool without grand discourses”.¹³ The institution’s job is to build houses, not to congratulate itself for building them, especially to people beyond Uruguay, who have no material gain at stake. This is in part because MEVIR has a de facto monopoly on the service it provides. In most of the places where MEVIR works, its target population of modest means has no other recourse for having their own home built to professional standards. Outside of Montevideo (and often within it), the idea of a private real estate developer buying a tract of land, building homes on that land, and selling those homes to families, is non-existent. Houses are either individual efforts, built independently of surrounding lots, or they are part of social housing schemes, such as MEVIR. The high price of building materials and of professional construction labor makes the individual housing solution cost-prohibitive for many low-income rural families. Tract homes, which have caught on in other Latin American countries, such as Chile and Argentina, are alien to the Uruguayan landscape. Thus, without competition, MEVIR has no need to seduce. Even if a company were to start competing with MEVIR, it would need years of sunk costs to enter the market. This amount of capital is exceedingly rare in Uruguay, and foreign companies are unlikely to act, because Uruguay is too small of a market.

A final hypothesis to explain why MEVIR has received limited attention regards how foreigners engage with Uruguay. Researchers visiting Uruguay from abroad are few and far

¹³ Field notes, 15 August 2022.

between. The country's small population and the distance from the established research resources of Europe and North America plays a role. Moreover, Uruguay is a relatively wealthy, politically stable, geographically uniform, and racially homogenous country (in the 2011 Census, 88% of Uruguayans identified as white) for its region. It is the only Latin American country that lies entirely outside the Tropics. Uruguay does not have snow-capped volcanoes or impenetrable jungles. Nor does it have a mass exodus of migrants fleeing violence and queuing up at the United States' southern border. This apparent mundaneness makes Uruguay a less obvious candidate for conducting research on many of the topics that color North American and European visions of Latin America and in turn social scientific research on the region.

Compounding Uruguay's tangential place in Latin America is the subordinate position of the Uruguayan interior in foreign engagement with the country. Scholars who come to Uruguay disproportionately focus their work in and on Montevideo. Even senior diplomats stationed in Uruguay have been surprised to learn from me about MEVIR's existence. Since MEVIR is so poorly disseminated, foreign researchers are unlikely to know about it before arriving in Uruguay. Furthermore, there is the matter of preconceptions. Even though MEVIR is targeted to people of lower means, its policies do not fall neatly under categories such as identity politics and environmentalism. If coming to the field in Uruguay with preconceived notions into which you are trying to fit your data, MEVIR is probably going to fly under the radar.

Questions and Methods

Following my initial observations in the field in 2014, and reading the existing literature on MEVIR, it was clear to me that nobody had adequately captured the essence of MEVIR as an institution, its impact on rural lives, or its broader implications for housing and rural

development policy. Moving beyond piecemeal studies about different aspects of the program, there needed to be a holistic account of MEVIR that accomplished the following three things. First, it should trace the institution's history from its inception to the present. Second, it needed to study MEVIR ethnographically up and down the country, from the office in Montevideo to the houses themselves, whether already built and those still under construction. Third, it would present MEVIR as a case study in best practices for housing, contextualizing the institution for an international audience. This is what this study sets out to do, never straying from two overarching questions: *What accounts for MEVIR's success and what aspects of MEVIR are most transferrable internationally?*

Since starting a Ph.D. at UCLA in 2016, I have returned several times to Uruguay to immerse myself as much as possible in MEVIR. This thesis draws on document analysis, interviews, and ethnographic observation conducted along twenty-two months of fieldwork in Uruguay between 2017 and 2024. In order to understand how MEVIR was established, I read over 700 documents about the organization's founding within Alberto Gallinal's papers, which are held at Uruguay's national archive (Archivo General de la Nación, or AGN). Seeking to understand MEVIR's institutional evolution across political regimes, and its expansion of services to address an increasingly complex rural population, I observed employees at the MEVIR office in Montevideo. Along the research, I interviewed more than forty of the actors who have been involved throughout MEVIR's history. Finally, in order to understand the many stages of MEVIR's interventions in territory, I observed twelve times at one building site. I also shadowed MEVIR personnel across the country as they worked on tasks ranging from researching where MEVIR will build to preparing for the signing of deeds.

Receiving a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad grant from January 2022 to January 2023 was vital for my carrying out this study. Over the course of these twelve months, I made decisions which influenced what this project is, and what it is not. I elected not to move to a small town and do a closer ethnography of a MEVIR nucleus. Opting for breadth over depth, I kept my base in Montevideo throughout the year, and I traveled frequently around the country in order to attend MEVIR events, to conduct interviews, to visit building sites, and simply observe the landscape. Even when visiting towns for leisure, I would make sure to visit and take photos of any MEVIR neighborhoods. Within six months, I had visited all of the country's nineteen departments. Besides not living in a MEVIR home and doing an embedded ethnography of an existing MEVIR nucleus, another limitation of my fieldwork is that I was not able to follow a construction site from its beginning to the end. In the town of Capilla del Sauce, I began my visits to the building site halfway through construction. Thus, my knowledge of the first half of MEVIR's building process is less first-hand than of the final stages. These limits of what I was able to achieve in twelve months and any resulting lacunae only make it clearer what subsequent work scholars can do to learn more about MEVIR.

Contributions and Argument

I argue that MEVIR's sustained effectiveness in housing the rural poor and winning the support of actors across Uruguayan politics and civil society comes down mainly to three factors. First, there has been a clearly defined objective, rooted in the Catholic conscience of its founder Alberto Gallinal (1909-1994), to improve the quality and quantity of the housing stock for the poor in a specific geographical context: towns smaller than Uruguay's departmental capitals, and dispersed rural areas. Second is a time-tested methodology of policy implementation. MEVIR is

not simply a housing builder. Instead, it executes every stage from research to homeownership in a process of positive social and spatial transformation, one that crafts participants, builders, and neighbors rather than beneficiaries and bystanders. Third is MEVIR's sensitivity to the scales and places where it operates, from the house to the nation. As my travels with MEVIR technicians to all nineteen departments of Uruguay illustrate, MEVIR vindicates the power of geographic knowledge.

Ensuring that people of modest means can satisfy the fundamentally human desire for a dignified dwelling to call home is an enduring ethical challenge worldwide. Learning about MEVIR's origins, evolution, and outcomes can inform scholars and policymakers about how, why, where, at what rate, and with whose support, homes can be better built for the poor. Several aspects of MEVIR explain its success relative to more widely known national-scale housing programs, including Mexico's INFONAVIT and Brazil's Minha Casa Minha Vida. First, as a parastatal and non-partisan organization, MEVIR has been able to maintain close contact with state networks and resources while remaining less susceptible to regime change and political patronage. Second, MEVIR's focus on incremental growth and on modestly sized construction sites have helped it avoid expanding beyond its means. Third, there is an iterative relationship between service provider and recipient that elicits greater trust and continuity than when making purely modular housing interventions. How MEVIR uses sweat equity is instrumental to why poor Uruguayans brave a long, competitive, and demanding process to build and live in a MEVIR home. Lastly, MEVIR's holistic notion of habitat and territory illustrates the broader point that the implementation of housing policy is always mediated through place.

Scholars typically approach housing policy through top-down state-driven projects, often motivated by social control or political patronage, two features which are of lesser concern to

MEVIR.¹⁴ Moreover, most literature analyzing housing for the poor focuses on one neighborhood or city.¹⁵ That MEVIR comprises over a hundred sites in many geographic situations (including manner of livelihood, size of settlement, and distance from Montevideo), and refers to its work as “a holistic concept of habitat”, and “interventions in territory”, presents an opportunity to understand the role of place in the success of housing movements. Policy-facing work on housing deals inadequately with historical and geographical contingency and ethnographic interrogations of affect. Conversely, more ethnographically grounded work and historical work on housing offers limited implications for present-day policymaking.¹⁶ I draw insights of both a policy-oriented approach and a close historical-ethnographic reading towards a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary understanding on the possibilities and limits of initiatives combatting rural housing precarity.

Besides empirical contributions on housing and Uruguayan history, and methodological innovations in how to study an institution, I make significant conceptual advances in geography. I use MEVIR as an argument for why geographers need to account for both the particular and the general. MEVIR is a development project entirely due to domestic agency. It was created by and is administered by Uruguayans for Uruguayans and was never imposed by outside agencies such as the World Bank or IMF. MEVIR has long recognized that housing is experienced not simply as an objective good, but as a place saturated with emotion and identity. Never straying from its mission to improve housing access in towns of fewer than 5,000 people and in dispersed rural areas, MEVIR has thrived since 1967 under twelve years of dictatorship (1973-1985) and decades of democratic regimes led by different parties. This is in large part because of its

¹⁴ e.g. Scott (1998).

¹⁵ e.g. Ghannam (2002), and Murphy (2015).

¹⁶ e.g. Hansen (1997), and Rudolph (2015).

sensitivity to a specific geographic context, influenced by terrain and climate, social relations, cultural preferences, land use patterns, and the juridical constraints of the nation-state.

Understanding why MEVIR works as a housing solution requires understanding Uruguayan geography. Conversely, MEVIR *does* provide a general recipe, or at the very least, a data point, on how to address a universal moral concern: the need to dwell.

Using such concepts from humanistic geography as *topophilia* and *geopiety*, I argue place is not a static backdrop on which MEVIR homes are built.¹⁷ It serves instead as a significant factor in the life of the homes before, during, and after their construction. This is true at the scale of a town or a neighborhood, but also at that of the nation. Uruguay has a storied history of policy innovations, ranging from legalizing divorce by the will of the woman in 1912 to legalizing marijuana in 2013. MEVIR's genesis and impact are part of this vanguardism made possible in part by Uruguay's relatively benign geography. Uruguay's search for identity has long involved finding ways to differentiate itself from Brazil and Argentina, its much larger and better resource-endowed neighbors. Furthermore, Uruguay is a middle-income country with fewer extremes between rich and poor than any other Latin American nation. The lessons to be learned from studying MEVIR span both the developing world and developed worlds.

Heeding Donald Meinig's call for geography to foster "environmental appreciation," something that builds awareness and empathy for places and for the people who inhabit them, my dissertation capitalizes on geography's rich possibilities for holistic, integrative, and synthetic work.¹⁸ It seeks to address people's curiosity about how places came to be the way they are. There are what I call "vectors to geographic literacy" that satisfy this curiosity. These vectors

¹⁷ On *topophilia*, see Tuan (1974). On *geopiety*, see Tuan (1975).

¹⁸ On "environmental appreciation", see Meinig (1971). On geography's capacities as an integrative, holistic, and synthetic discipline, see: Harris (1971), Agnew (1989), Baker (2003), and Murphy (2018).

are tangible categories of knowledge through which people come to learn about places. Teaching and writing using these vectors can make geographic information legible, accessible, and captivating to a non-specialist audience. Three examples of these vectors are “authors,” “regions,” and “symbolic landscapes.” Authors of place illustrate that embedded in landscapes are biographies of individual agency.¹⁹ Regions are the fundamental unit of areal variation; they provide the boundaries for people’s experiences of the world.²⁰ Symbolic landscapes represent the idea that actual places accrue symbolic value as types of places with markers of identity over time.²¹ *More Than a Home* is a concrete historical, geographical, and ethnographic synthesis of the intersection between these three vectors, wherein Gallinal as an author of place, the rural interior of Uruguay as a salient region, and MEVIR homes as a landscape symbolic of rural progress are co-created in a historical process that highlights the importance of understanding place in addressing a universal moral task: how people of modest means can dwell with dignity.

Summary of Chapters

My dissertation consists of this introduction on why MEVIR matters, followed by two sections that correspond to two of the three main factors that explain MEVIR’s success: a clearly defined objective (Chapters One and Two) and a time-tested methodology (Chapters Three, Four, and Five). I end with a conclusion positing future directions for research on MEVIR and offering my thoughts on the extent to which the idea of MEVIR can travel beyond Uruguay. My frequent analysis on the third factor behind MEVIR’s success, the institution’s sensitivity to place and scale, anchors the narrative throughout.

¹⁹ On authorship of landscape, see Samuels (1979).

²⁰ On the centrality of region to geographic imaginaries, see Hart (1982).

²¹ My conception of types of places draws on Meinig (1979).

In the first section, “MEVIR AS OBJECTIVE”, I construct a history of the institution and argue that maintaining a clearly defined objective of housing the poor in a targeted geographic context has allowed MEVIR to thrive for over five decades.

Chapter One studies the vision of MEVIR’s founder Alberto Gallinal, and how he was able to get MEVIR off the ground in a period of great economic and political strife in Uruguay. I draw on my analysis of Gallinal’s papers, which I consulted in Uruguay’s national archive, and interviews of his living descendants and colleagues.

Chapter Two draws on my ethnography of the MEVIR office and interviews of current and retired employees and board members to show how the institution has evolved since its founding and how it has managed to continue its core mission despite significant shifts in Uruguayan politics and rural livelihoods.

In the second section, “MEVIR AS METHOD”, I write about my experience shadowing MEVIR employees across the country to understand the organization’s methodology of intervening in a place, walking through the process from beginning to end. MEVIR does not just give housing. It researches, plans, builds, and follows through on housing in a clearly defined geographical context.

Chapter Three studies how MEVIR decides where to build (based on analyses of where housing demand is the greatest and where land is most available), how it selects participants, and how it interacts with local leaders to maximize the effectiveness of its interventions.

In Chapter Four, I write about MEVIR’s use of mutual aid construction, based largely on twelve visits to a construction site in the town of Capilla del Sauce between March and December 2022. I focus on the relationship between social workers and participants, and how the building of homes is concomitant with the building of better citizens and neighbors.

Chapter Five studies how MEVIR follows up on residents' well-being after construction, and on the signing of deeds when participants become homeowners twenty some years after they build their homes. I also highlight instances beyond the institution's core mission, such as natural disaster relief, where MEVIR's expertise and prestige in construction and social work is called upon by the Uruguayan government.

Chapter One

A Nation's Improver: Alberto Gallinal and the Creation of MEVIR

This chapter studies Alberto Gallinal's vision for improved rural housing in Uruguay and the steps taken for this vision to become a nationwide institution, the Movement for the Eradication of Unhealthy Rural Housing (MEVIR). It outlines the history of the unhealthy rural housing MEVIR sought to eradicate, reviews the existing literature on Gallinal, provides a MEVIR-centered biographical sketch of Gallinal, discusses four experiences Gallinal had between 1959 and 1966 that were pivotal in conceiving of MEVIR as an institution, articulates Gallinal's social and geographic vision for MEVIR, and traces a series of events between 1967 and 1972 that helped MEVIR go from vision to reality. The chapter concludes by positing Gallinal as a quintessential case of an "author of place" in the humanistic geographical tradition.

THE LONGUE DURÉE PRESENCE OF "RAT TOWNS"

A movement to eradicate unhealthy rural housing by building better homes implies that there was unhealthy rural housing to eradicate in the first place. The most prominent form of this housing was *rancheríos*, pejoratively known as *pueblos de ratas* ("rat towns"), informal settlements in the interstitial spaces between ranches in Uruguay's sparsely populated countryside. *Rancheríos* were nothing new to mid-twentieth century Uruguay. Their formation was concomitant with the *longue durée* transformations in land use that led to the creation and marginalization of a rural underclass starting with land hunger during the colonial period and accelerated by the modernization of ranching in the second half of the nineteenth century.²²

²² My M.A. thesis traces in more detail the *longue durée* history of *rancheríos*. See: Brandt (2019).

The fact that *rancheríos* were a persistent scourge across the rural Uruguayan landscape may come as a surprise to those with only passing familiarity of Uruguay. By most metrics, mid-twentieth century Uruguay outstripped its Latin American neighbors in terms of material and cultural development, socioeconomic equality, and political stability, earning the sobriquet “the Switzerland of the Americas”.²³ Outside observers often touted Uruguay as a model country. Most foreign monographs about Uruguay in the twentieth century are a variation on this theme, focusing on the achievements of the “welfare state” presided over by José Batlle y Ordóñez, president of Uruguay from 1903-1907 and 1911-1915 and a continuing political influence until his death in 1929.²⁴ By today’s standards, Batlle y Ordóñez’s accomplishments in labor legislation, education, secularism, and other fields stand out as progressive. Even those writing on the eve of Uruguay’s military dictatorship from 1973-1985 tend to conclude with a rosy picture of Uruguay, focusing on its superiority—actual or perceived—over its neighbors, and usually only mentioning, but never centering or investigating the growing problem of *rancheríos*. North American and European academics found poverty during the Cold War a greater concern elsewhere in the hemisphere. More pertinent is the fact that most of these studies were written from sojourns in Montevideo and prepared through disproportionate exposure to the urban political and intellectual classes, people with limited direct knowledge of affairs in the Uruguayan interior. Such blinkered assessments bias how knowledge about Uruguay is consumed abroad.

However, an examination of Uruguayan intellectual history in the first two thirds of the twentieth century shows any notion of Uruguay as a model of social equality is unsustainable

²³ For a discussion of the genesis of this term and the criticism of it by certain strands of Uruguayan intellectuals, see: Caetano (2018).

²⁴ For example, see: Hanson (1938), Fitzgibbon (1954), Lindahl (1962), Alisky (1968).

whenever Montevideo and the capitals of Uruguay's departments are erased. In other words, government policies before, during, and after Batlle y Ordóñez's welfare state privileged cities, most importantly with regards to housing. They also exacerbated the peripheral role of the *campo*, failing to eradicate rancheríos and to stem the tide of rural-to-urban migration. Exemplifying E. Bradford Burns in *The Poverty of Progress*, the benefits of modernization in Uruguay were unevenly distributed and they formed a barrier, in fact, to development.²⁵

It is noteworthy how these exposés of rural underdevelopment and unhealthy housing by Uruguayan authors came from all points of the ideological spectrum.²⁶ The underdevelopment of the *campo* relative to the city was of concern to conservative landowners such as Luis Alberto de Herrera, the foremost *caudillo* in Uruguay's National Party during his lifetime (1873-1959), who resented the unrelenting urban biases of social and economic policy.²⁷ It was also of concern to avowed communists, such as Vicente Rovetta, who insisted on the right of rural laborers to own

²⁵ Burns (1983).

²⁶ See for example: de Herrera (1920), Martínez Lamas (1930), Chiarino and Saralegui (1944), Solari (1958), Rovetta (1961), Vidart (1967), and Terra (1969). Juan Vicente Chiarino and his son Gonzalo were important interlocutors of Alberto Gallinal.

²⁷ Uruguay's *Partido Nacional* (National Party), known as the *blancos*, is one of two main political parties that emerged out of the Guerra Grande civil war in the 1840s. For most of their history, they have been in opposition to the ruling *Partido Colorado* (Colorado Party), of which Batlle y Ordóñez was a member. De Herrera's death was untimely, as the *blancos* took power just the year before following ninety-four consecutive years of rule by the *colorados*. Discontent about the state of rural life was key to the 1958 *blanco* victory (Iturria, 2008). Historically, and in many ways still at present, both parties can be classified as big tents. They have constituencies to varying degrees across the country, do not fit neatly into ideological boxes, and their intra-party factional quarrels have often taken precedence over the inter-party rivalry. In general terms, however, *blancos* have drawn their support from Uruguay's interior, while the *colorados* have drawn support from the capital. An argument can be made that this urban versus rural pattern defining the parties is true not just demographically, but also in a more spiritual sense, in terms of which geographical setting each party sees as more essential to the construction and value of the Uruguayan nation. The emergence of the left-wing coalition party *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front), or FA, following Uruguay's return to democracy in 1985 disrupted Uruguay's long-entrenched two-party system, with the FA gaining ground centrifugally from their base of working-class neighborhoods in Montevideo. While *colorados* held three of the first four five-year presidential terms after the dictatorship, they have since suffered more than the *blancos*, never having exceeded seventeen percent of the votes for president in any general election since 1999. Today, the Colorado Party is for the first time part of a coalition government led by the National Party. Uruguay's current president Luis Lacalle Pou is a great-grandson of Luis Alberto de Herrera.

the land upon which they worked, whether they raised crops or livestock.²⁸ These writings were largely penned by leading thinkers, who held at least some direct knowledge of the matter.

However, their thoughts came from outside of the formal academy. Grounded in ethnographic field research, two works are notable exceptions. Renzo Pi Hugarte and Germán Wettstein's 1955 detailed study of a locale called Las Cañas in Tacuarembó Department, and a two-volume study of various *rancheríos* led by the extension service of the University of the Republic published in 1968, both address the *rancherío* specifically as a material and cultural phenomenon. They treat it not just as part of broader theses on rural underdevelopment.²⁹

Regardless of their objectives, all these thinkers believed that eradicating *rancheríos* was a problem of national importance. While *rancheríos* as ensembles of homes were not Uruguay's only form of unhealthy rural housing (precarious dwellings, whether isolated or within the fabric of a small town also qualified), they were the *type of place* most symbolic of the inequities and displacement produced by a ranching system, and of the inequities between cities and

²⁸ De Herrera and Rovetta are interesting and relevant figures not just for what they say about rural housing woes, but also for the broader currents they illustrate in twentieth-century Uruguayan political thought. De Herrera was a major statesman, and an ardent anti-imperialist. Gerardo Caetano proposes three defining features of de Herrera's thought. These are his "anti-Jacobin conservative liberalism", his vision for a "realist" insertion of Uruguay into international politics, and his "ruralist" perspective (Caetano, 2021). *Herrerismo*, albeit adapted to the times, remains a prevailing current in National Party thought today. Vicente Rovetta (1925-2018), unlike de Herrera, was not a politician in the two main parties. Born and raised in the town of Nueva Palmira in Colonia Department, he worked as ranch hand from a very young age. He then, at 15, started working at Nueva Palmira's oilseed factory owned by Bunge & Born. He took to union activities there, and his dismissal from the factory for participating in the 1947 national oilseed workers strike coincided with his joining the Communist Party of Uruguay, whose members were numerically a marginal force in Uruguayan politics. During the 1960s, Rovetta ran a bookshop in Montevideo which was integral to circulating Maoist ideas in Uruguay and beyond in Latin America. The authorities in China took kindly to Rovetta, and in 1967, he was feted at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing by Mao Zedong himself. Following Uruguay's military *junta* in 1973, the government confiscated his political literature and secretly ordered the police to bomb his office and warehouse. Rovetta initially found refuge in Argentina but he was imprisoned by Argentine secret police in 1974 and jailed without trial. When released a year later, and deported to Peru, he relocated not to the United States, Western Europe, or other Latin American countries sympathetic to dissidents, as did many key figures coming from the Uruguayan left, but to China. For more on Rovetta, see Zhang and Xie (2019), and a blogpost by his son Pablo, Rovetta (n.d.).

²⁹ Pi Hugarte and Wettstein (1955), and Departamento de Extensión Universitaria (1968).

countryside.³⁰ Beyond the symbolism of appearing as a blemish on the record of an otherwise relatively well-off country, they also meant the material suffering of thousands of people, who lived prone to disease, discomfort, and a lack of dignity.³¹



Figure 5: This postage stamp, on display in the MEVIR office, commemorates the institution’s fiftieth anniversary. It depicts the contrast between MEVIR homes and the insalubrious dwellings of mid-twentieth century rural Uruguay. These last often hosted the chagas disease-carrying *vinchuca* bug (photo by author, 25 October 2022).

³⁰ Donald Meinig (1979) writes about types of places (in his case the New England village, the Midwestern Main Street, and California suburbia) that over time become landscapes symbolic of larger processes. Viewed through this lens, *rancheríos*, and subsequently, MEVIR are prominent symbolic landscapes in rural Uruguay.

³¹ The persistence of *rancheríos* does not mean that there were not major campaigns to improve well-being in the Uruguayan interior, particularly beyond departmental capitals. In fact, starting in the latter third of the nineteenth century, governments provided many modernizing services beyond Montevideo, including rural electrification, potable water, and policlinics. Most notable was education. Following the ideal of free, mandatory, and secular primary education advocated by reformer José Pedro Varela in the 1870s, rural schoolhouses proliferated across Uruguay’s countryside. Secondary education, however, rarely penetrated beyond departmental capitals, and tertiary education remained exclusively in Montevideo. Varela was heavily influenced by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Horace Mann. See Carreño Rivero (2010) for more on the lineage of Varela’s pedagogical thought. There was a distinct geography to this rural educational project, as the extension of a sense of nationhood spread from the relatively more enlightened city towards the interior with an eye to the impending southern extension of Brazilian culture. Artifacts of “progress” in Uruguay, whether these relate to education, material culture, or technology have almost always moved from south to north (Brandt, 2022).

Rancheríos were the unaccounted-for margin of error in the “chief laboratory for social experimentation in the Americas”, a phrase American scholar Simon Hanson used in 1938 to describe Uruguay.³² The persistence of this undesirable form of settlement came as the result of blind spots of *batllismo*, Uruguay’s governing ideology for most of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Both Batlle y Ordóñez, and his nephew Luis Batlle Berres, who served either as the president or as a leading Colorado Party figure for much of the 1940s and 1950s, refused to engage in class warfare. They preferred a conciliatory approach to social problems, where laws, rather than redistribution, would be the cure for economic ills, thereby envisioning a society where workers could gradually, diligently, and methodically become bourgeois.³³ Crucially, *batllismo* did little to press the hegemony of large-scale landowners, including for such reasons as seeing foreign capital as a more politically strategic target for appropriation, a calculation that income tax would disadvantage enterprise, and a belief that landowners were not responsible for social problems because they owned their land by “general consensus”.³⁴

Beyond this political balancing act, the administrative peculiarities of Uruguayan housing policy also worked against a comprehensive plan to end rancheríos. The domain of housing was especially prone to a pro-urban bias. While Uruguay had a long and accomplished history of

³² Hanson (1938).

³³ Simon Hanson invokes two telling quotations from Batlle y Ordóñez. In 1917, this statesman had argued “inequality is not deliberate on the part of the more fortunate”, and in 1921, he claimed “there is [no] reason for class hatred, for we all covet riches”. See Hanson (1938), p. 22 and also Pintos (1938), pp. 132-134. D’Elía (1982) cites two corroborating quotes from Battle Berres. The first comes from a 1944 speech to the Congress of American Parliamentarians in Chile: “We aren’t classist, nor do we form castes; we only want the well-being of all and aspire that ‘the poor are less poor and the rich must be less rich.’” (Translation mine) Quotation marks are added on the final phrase since it was wording he borrowed from his uncle. The second quote is taken from a 1951 speech delivered in Paysandú, at a time when that city was consolidating itself as Uruguay’s second industrial center after Montevideo. It reflects both the *neobatllista* (relating, that is, to the ideology of Batlle Berres) critique of neighboring authoritarians Juan Domingo Perón and Getúlio Vargas, and also quickness in disassociating with the Soviet bloc: “When good *batllismo* happens, communism has nothing to do”.

³⁴ See: Hanson (1938) p. 235, Pintos (1938) p. 132, and Lindahl (1962) p. 257.

social housing, these achievements were almost exclusively limited to cities.³⁵ With a housing ministry not yet created (see Chapter Two), there was no national housing agenda that encompassed places not classified as urban. Housing agencies did exist, but they were small in scale and associated with the cities. Until the 1968 Housing Law (Law 13.728), the provision of social housing was the domain of individual departments. This inhibited national organization and national funding to solve a truly national problem.³⁶ Moreover, the factors impeding an improved rural housing policy were not entirely top down. Rural social movements in Uruguay were limited in scope and in organization. The dispersed nature of ranching labor, which formed the bulk of rural economic activity in mid-twentieth century Uruguay, made it challenging for workers to organize. Low population density accompanying a weak communications system, and a reliance on employers in order to meet many basic needs, meant that ranching laborers held very limited power as a political block. It is telling that the most successful labor movement in rural Uruguay came out of Bella Unión (see Chapter Three), a town at the triple border of Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil. Bella Unión, home to Uruguay's most sub-tropical environment in an overwhelmingly temperate country, grows Uruguay's only sugar cane. This is a crop which needs a much greater concentration of labor per hectare than ranching. It is famous historically for subjecting its workers to harsh working conditions, and it has brought weaker social ties between workers and bosses than ranching customarily did.

Although MEVIR was the brainchild of a prominent *blanco* opposition figure, its accomplishments fall under the same umbrella of social experiments that are characteristic of *batllismo*. MEVIR is emphatically reformist, rather than revolutionary. It does not seek to

³⁵ Aristondo Martín (2005) provides a good assessment of the history of Uruguayan social housing, noting MEVIR as the foremost exception to the urban-centered trend.

³⁶ Conversation with the historian María José Bolaña, 8 August 2022.

reorganize the means of production, apart from helping people formerly indebted to landlords for their housing become the owners of their own homes. In lieu of inventing a new social and economic system, MEVIR's objective is to improve the material quality of life as much as possible within the existing one.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ALBERTO GALLINAL



Figure 6: August 1971 photograph of Alberto Gallinal in Pueblo Celeste, Salto Department (image courtesy of Rosario Bisio and the *Grupo de Vecinos de Nuevo Valentín*).

The chief author of this ultimately successful experiment was Alberto Gallinal (1909-1994), one of Uruguay's wealthiest ranchers. Gallinal did not publish specifically on the shortcomings of rural housing in mid-twentieth century Uruguay, but he was eager to do something about it, as many of his letters to family, friends, and colleagues show with passion

and purpose. As an everyday participant in the rural landscape, both in his capacity as a landowner who took care to get to know his workers, and as a frequent traveler to other ranches around the country, he was very attuned to the topic.

MEVIR arises in Uruguay's broader historical context outlined above, but it also arises in the context of Gallinal's life and work. Despite Gallinal's manifold contributions to Uruguayan history and the treasure of sources his personal papers represent, there is remarkably little written about him. The only book about Gallinal is *El Tío Coco*, a biographical sketch compiled by his youngest daughter, Susana.³⁷ *El Tío Coco* forms an engaging read, full of important facts, images, and anecdotes. However, the book is sporadic in chronological and thematic coverage, lacking in analysis and historical-geographical context, and it assumes an exclusively Uruguayan readership. There is no study beyond this that takes Gallinal's role in Uruguayan history as a central object.

Some recent works by Uruguayan authors have recognized his accomplishments. A history commissioned by the *Sociedad Criadores de Corriedale del Uruguay* (Society of Corriedale [Sheep] Raisers of Uruguay), written by a team of prominent social scientists, discusses Gallinal's seminal role in that organization.³⁸ The economic historian Jorge Álvarez Scanniello has published several articles on the comparative trajectories of agricultural development between Uruguay and New Zealand, in which he has acknowledged the importance of Gallinal's travels.³⁹ Covering an homage in Uruguay's congress to mark the fiftieth anniversary of MEVIR, the political scientist Adolfo Garcé wrote a piece in *El Observador*, Uruguay's second largest daily newspaper. In his article, Garcé recognizes MEVIR as a

³⁷ Gallinal de Bonner (1990).

³⁸ Caetano et al (2016).

³⁹ Álvarez Scanniello and Bortagaray (2007), Álvarez Scanniello (2018), Álvarez Scanniello (2020).

“transcendental creation”, one that emerged during an agonizing time for Uruguayan democracy.⁴⁰ The most serious academic study to address Gallinal’s contributions to rural Uruguay through consultation of his papers is a recent doctoral dissertation in sociology from the Université de Montpellier on human-bovine relationships in natural prairie ecosystems.⁴¹

Aside from these exceptions, Gallinal appears but occasionally and briefly in the historical and social scientific literature explaining Uruguay during the Cold War, the trajectory of Uruguayan agriculture, and the nature of Uruguayan housing movements.⁴² His authorship of place is acknowledged and listed, even taken for granted, but it is not scrutinized, and it is rarely situated in a context beyond national historiographies.

There are multiple possible reasons for this. The first is that Gallinal was an unsung and austere character, a person devoted more to pragmatic pursuits than plaudits or power. Outliving his wife Elvira by several years, he lived alone toward the end of his life, based in an apartment

⁴⁰ Garcé (2017).

⁴¹ De Torres Álvarez (2017) is methodologically innovative in bridging the humanities and natural sciences. Her main argument is that the intensification of livestock raising in rural Uruguay tends to substitute reciprocity between humans, livestock, and grasslands with mercantile exchange relations, ones that increase the vulnerability of the ranching ecosystem. De Torres Álvarez discusses Gallinal mainly with respect to his work and writings on the breeding of Hereford cattle (see pp. 138-140). For example, Gallinal cautioned fellow Hereford producers in 1976 against extravagant measures in breeding that would distance Herefords from their vitality, and “from their love for life and their capacity for survival”. In 1979, he published an article in the yearbook of Uruguay’s Sociedad de Criadores de Hereford, where he emphasized the risk of privileging size and nothing but size. He criticized what he called “satyr” bulls that were excessively masculine and difficult to work with. De Torres Álvarez also analyses in detail a 1938 document authored in part by Gallinal’s brother Juan Pedro titled *Estudios sobre praderas naturales en el Uruguay*, showcasing the advantages of Uruguay’s natural prairies over artificial ones (Gallinal Heber, J. P. et al., 1938). The document drew heavily on the research of a co-author, the botanist Bernardo Rosengurt (1916-1985). As the foremost scholarly authority on Uruguay’s natural vegetation, Rosengurt became one of Alberto Gallinal’s most extensive correspondents. *Estudios sobre praderas naturales* argues that the autochthonous flora of Uruguay’s prairies has rich potential as an expression of ecological equilibrium that should not be destroyed with impunity (De Torres Álvarez 2017, p. 84). De Torres Álvarez (p. 83) makes the interesting point that income from estancias of the Gallinal Heber family helped fund Rosengurt’s early botanical research from 1938-1949, which laid a foundation for revindicating the value of natural grasslands. After this breakthrough, Rosengurt’s subsequent research was financed by international funds for scientific cooperation. De Torres Álvarez shows how this illustrates Uruguay’s public sector’s preference to use a model of livestock raising that is based on artificial, or planted, grasslands. Moreover, she makes the significant geographical distinction that although both systems have long coexisted, natural prairie grasses have been deployed in livestock raising more in the north and east of the country.

⁴² On the Cold War, see Morales and Fajardo (2006), and Sempol (2008). On the trajectory of Uruguayan agriculture, see Piñeiro (1991), and Piñeiro and Morães (2008). On housing movements, see Ramírez Colotta (2014), and Magri (2016).

on Plaza Fabini in Central Montevideo, near the MEVIR headquarters. Along his life, he had given away most of his money to charitable causes. While Gallinal was very active in the National Party, he never held the highest political offices.

Gallinal's ostensibly conservative politics and his association by proxy with Uruguay's military dictatorship have rendered him *persona non grata* in many academic circles. As in much of Latin America, there is an implicit bias in Uruguayan social sciences and humanities favoring left-wing figures as agents of positive social change and right-wing figures as inhibitors of it. Gallinal was neither active in the military's arrival to power in 1973, nor in its governance structure. He was, however, an avowed anti-communist and he tacitly supported the military takeover, shown through his appeal for order and his approval of the military's new economic orientation.⁴³ Although he was not part of the campaign, Gallinal voted in favor of the defeated 1980 plebiscite to maintain military governance.⁴⁴ Moreover, when the National Party reorganized in 1982 in anticipation of a return to democracy, Gallinal led the *Libertad y Servicio sublema*.⁴⁵ This political grouping supported the status quo, yet it lost in a landslide result to a coalition led by Wilson Ferreira Aldunate (1919-1988) that opposed the dictatorship. Gallinal's misfortune was spoofed in *El Dedo*, a magazine of political cartoons.⁴⁶

These acts may have seemed like minor setbacks at the time in the late stages of an accomplished career, but over the decades they have served as a damaging influence against

⁴³ On Gallinal's anti-communism, see Alfaro (1990). On Gallinal's tacit support of the military, see Monné (2014).

⁴⁴ Lissidini (2000).

⁴⁵ Until a 1996 referendum, the election of the President, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate were decided by a single vote. Within parties, there were factions known as *sublemas* (sub lemmas). Voters chose a *sublema*, and the presidential candidate of the *sublema* in the party with most votes would become president. This meant that in certain instances, the most-voted presidential candidate overall did not win. In 1971, for example, Wilson Ferreira Aldunate of the National Party led all candidates with twenty-six percent of the vote. Pedro Bordaberry of the Colorado Party became president with only twenty-two percent of votes. This is because when all *sublemas* were tallied, the *colorados* garnered forty-one percent of votes to the *blancos*' forty percent.

⁴⁶ Allier Montaño (2001), Silva Schultze (2014).

Gallinal's overall legacy. The spate of recent biographies of Wilson, colloquially referred to in Uruguay by his given name rather than his surname, in contrast with the current lack of biographical work on Gallinal, serves as a testament to the power of historical contingency.⁴⁷ While critiques of Gallinal on political grounds may be warranted, discarding his overall body of work ignores the fact MEVIR was an established institution by the time the military regime was installed in 1973. It was already affecting the lives of Uruguayans in practical way. As Chapter Two will show in more detail, any compliance of Gallinal with the military regime is extraneous to MEVIR's development as a policy actor.

The Montevideo-centric bias of both domestic and foreign researchers makes Gallinal's place authorship less visible than for those figures whose work has mainly been in the capital. For example, Gallinal's distant cousin Juan Pablo Terra spearheaded urban social housing during a similar period, and this has been better documented.⁴⁸

Since the family name is synonymous with wealth in a "mesocratic" country, one that disdains wealth at its worst and shows indifference to wealth at its best, and is moreover associated with devout a history of Catholicism within South America's most secular country, Gallinal is easily cast off as an elite, aloof, and paternalistic figure.⁴⁹ In his book *La quimera y el oro*, Raúl Jacob notes this contradiction, writing that "in Uruguay the surname Gallinal is associated with large rural property, religious fervor, agricultural modernization and improvement in the quality of life for its servants and collaborators: rural wage laborers".⁵⁰ Indeed, in a 1961 survey made by Vicente Rovetta, only a single family owned more land in

⁴⁷ Such biographies of Wilson include Luppi (2008), Pereyra (2013), Sotelo (2015), and Ferreira and Vignolo (2019). Interestingly, Wilson Ferreira Aldunate, like Gallinal, also hails from a town on Ruta 7, Nico Perez, which is two railway stations north of Cerro Colorado. He moved to Melo for school at young age, and subsequently to Montevideo, and his commitment to local development bears little resemblance to that of Gallinal.

⁴⁸ Martí (2018).

⁴⁹ On Uruguay's "mesocracy", see: Real de Azúa (1964), and Andacht (2000).

⁵⁰ Jacob (2001), p. 101

Uruguay than the Gallinals.⁵¹ What Jacob hints at however is that Gallinal's generosity is rooted in extended daily interactions with the rural poor and is tailored to fit the mesocratic ideals of Uruguay rather than to challenge them. MEVIR and Gallinal's other social initiatives bear little resemblance to "drive-by philanthropy" motivated by personal image and gain and entailing little sustained contact with any beneficiaries.

GALLINAL'S MANY HATS

An exhaustive biography of Gallinal is not the objective of this chapter, but a portrait shows how Gallinal's background is instrumental to understanding the creation of MEVIR. There are reasons it was he, to whom the idea occurred, and not somebody else. And there is a rationale for why it was executed under his specific leadership. Gallinal was a multifaceted character, and many of these facets played a role in the genesis of MEVIR.

The scion of rural wealth

As noted by Raúl Jacob, the surname Gallinal is synonymous in Uruguay with wealth derived from large-scale landholdings.⁵² Alberto's wealth, both inherited, and acquired through his judicious management of his ranch, matters to MEVIR for two reasons. First, his financial situation allowed him to subsidize the initial prototype homes in Cerro Colorado (see later in this chapter). After these homes proved successful, and once funding for MEVIR began to flow from public coffers, this afforded him the time, energy, and security that allowed him to devote his attention toward a project from which he would receive no personal gain. Second, as evidenced

⁵¹ Rovetta (1961).

⁵² José Antonio del Gallinal, an Asturian noble, left Spain with his family in 1781. They went first to Patagonia, and eventually settled in Uruguay (Jacob 2001, p. 98). Jacob provides a detailed summary of the estancias the Gallinal family inherited, and from which ancestors. The most significant inheritance came from Alberto Gallinal's maternal line. In 1825, John (hispanicized as Juan) Jackson, a native of Staffordshire, and Alberto Gallinal's great-grandfather, purchased 110,000 hectares in Florida Department, most of which is still owned by descendants today.

in many of Gallinal's letters, his wealth was a catalyst for MEVIR. Personal wealth created in him a sense of guilt about the privileges he enjoyed compared to so many of those around him.

The lawyer by training, albeit reluctantly

Alberto is usually referred to in Uruguay as Doctor Gallinal. This is because he earned a law degree from the University of the Republic in 1929. He did this more to please his father than out of any passion for legal affairs and he ended up never practicing law, going directly into ranching following his round-the-world honeymoon in 1935. Holding a university degree in a society where tertiary education remained an elite pursuit added to Gallinal's aura as an authority figure, especially among his rancher peers, for whom degrees were seen as unnecessary to their occupation. Gallinal's legal acumen was pivotal to MEVIR's establishment. MEVIR, above all stems from a law, and it is a law that Gallinal worked to write.

The devout Catholic

Gallinal's family members hasten to tell the story of his visit to Santiago de Compostela in the mid-1960s when he was trying to start MEVIR.⁵³ When he arrived at the altar of the cathedral, he prayed for three things: patience, patience, and patience. Susana Gallinal, his youngest daughter, notes the irony of her father's patience in executing a long-term vision when in the day-to-day of life he often struggled to be patient.⁵⁴ As the Compostela anecdote illustrates, Catholicism was central to Gallinal's worldview and to his family life. His brother served as Uruguay's ambassador to the Holy See. As a public institution to house the rural poor, MEVIR was never going to be a religious organization, not least since Uruguay is Latin America's most secular country excepting for communist Cuba, both in its low percentage of religious adherents and in the long-standing separation of church and state. Nevertheless,

⁵³ Interview with Susana Gallinal and Elvirita Gallinal, 30 June 2022.

⁵⁴ Interview with Susana Gallinal and Elvirita Gallinal, 30 June 2022.

Gallinal's religion was relevant to MEVIR's creation in two important ways. First, his beliefs gave him a conscience to think and do something about lessening the misfortune of others. Second, his social network had a strong Catholic bent. His connection with priests up and down the country was key in establishing initial demand and local support for MEVIR.⁵⁵

The politician and statesman

Gallinal never held major national office, but he was a prominent and powerful figure in the National Party for over three decades. His involvement in politics, including his 1966 presidential election campaign discussed later in this chapter, impacted MEVIR in a few ways. Most broadly, it added to his national network, which was already robust thanks to ranching and religious connections, and it cemented his access to figures at the highest level. From 1950 to 1951, Gallinal was the *intendente* of Florida Department. He resigned from this post of great power and prestige because it was not the type of political activity that satisfied him.

Paraphrasing letters he wrote at the time to explain his resignation, putting out fires was not how he wanted to spend his political capital.⁵⁶ This administrative experience is important, not just because first-hand knowledge of how *intendencias* work is crucial for getting anything done in the Uruguayan interior, but also because it clarified to him how he did want to spend his political capital. This was the creation of novel programs to solve social problems.

The agrarian anti-communist

⁵⁵ For example, see Gallinal's letter on 7 Mar 1967 to Juan Vicente Chiarino (AGN 360.583) detailing the support of the Bishop of Salto, a letter to Gallinal from the Bishop of Tacuarembó on 13 July 1967 (AGN 2.5.91), a letter from the priest in Charqueada, Treinta y Tres to Gallinal on 24 March 1970 (AGN 2.5.161), Gallinal's letter on 12 May 1975 to the Bishop of Florida (AGN 2.5.86), a letter from grade school teacher Teresita Arrambide de Gil to Gallinal on 13 Jan 1975 on the involvement of the priest in the plan in Independencia, Florida (AGN 2.1.179), and a letter from Gallinal on 3 Oct 1977 on the plan in Tranqueras, Rivera.

⁵⁶ Antonio López Hodgson, a retired dairy producer in the town of Cardal, Florida, and the father of the current intendente of Florida, was a friend of Gallinal. López adds that Gallinal renounced the intendente position because he did not like acting on pressure from other politicians, preferring instead to devote his time to causes directly helping people in need (interview, 15 June 2022).

Seen from beyond Uruguay in the perspective of the time, the main strands in Gallinal's political thought are anti-urban and anti-communist. Gallinal notably tried to spend as little time as possible in Montevideo. In the "pastoral city-state", the capital was where meetings took place out of necessity, and Gallinal returned each week to his ranch as quickly as possible, despite his wife's wish to spend more time attending cultural events.⁵⁷ Concisely articulated by the architectural historian Mary Méndez, behind MEVIR stands a "an anti-metropolitan matrix characterized by a positive assessment of agrarian life".⁵⁸ Gallinal never referred to MEVIR as an anti-communist program, and he never sought financial or logistical support for MEVIR from the United States or other anti-communist allies. Nevertheless, to situate Gallinal's thought processes, it is germane to note that he wrote favorably of anti-communist efforts like the Alliance for Progress.⁵⁹ His correspondence contains many critiques of the growing threat of communism in the 1960s, particularly his belief that solutions for rural poverty and housing brought forward by city-based left-wing thinkers did not show an understanding of how rural laborers actually wanted to live their lives.⁶⁰

The innovative rancher

Gallinal was the antithesis of an absentee landowner. He was very active in modernizing his ranch, San Pedro de Timote, of which he took control in 1945 following the death of his father Alejandro. Beyond San Pedro, Gallinal tirelessly championed innovation in ranching

⁵⁷ Interview with Susana Gallinal, 10 March 2022. On the "pastoral city-state" as a geographical metaphor for Uruguay, see: Brandt (2022).

⁵⁸ Méndez (2022) p. 63.

⁵⁹ See Méndez (2022) p. 67, and Gallinal (1961).

⁶⁰ A letter dated 21 April 1967 from Gallinal to the dentist Luis F. Beraldo, a key ally in Paysandú, is instructive (AGN 360.655). "It is transcendent to finish [establishing MEVIR] and demonstrate how much it costs and that it is possible to mobilize a community—let's not talk more about *rancherío* inhabitants: a community that, having common problems, assumes responsibility and [then] makes the affirmative act of solving them itself through community work. If all this were not pure and Christian, I would say that it is *alta política* because confusing the masses with the term communal instead of communist means taking the bones out of the hyena's mouth in order to spit them out" (translation mine).

across Uruguay. At its height, San Pedro covered 30,000 hectares, and saw 2,500 cattle sold per year. Gallinal fashioned San Pedro into a model operation, in which to showcase best practices to ranchers from around the country. He also used the ranch to illustrate the potency of Uruguayan ranching to international visitors. These included major dignitaries such as Brazilian president João Goulart, Prince Bernard of the Netherlands, and Prince Philip of England.⁶¹ Hardly a day went by without guests touring around the premises, often led by Alberto himself. Gallinal was a leader in the improvement of livestock in Uruguay. He served as either the chief founder or at least a founding member of the Uruguayan breeding societies for Corriedale sheep, Hereford cattle, and Criollo horses. He also led the Uruguayan Society for the Improvement of Pastures, and he enthusiastically started a company called Agromax. This imported phosphates, mainly from Tunisia via French companies, to produce fertilizers, something of great relevance, since Uruguayan soils contained no natural phosphorus. Although it was directed toward humans, who worked with livestock rather than toward the animals themselves, MEVIR fits into this ethos of improvement which characterizes Gallinal's body of work. The idea is implicit in MEVIR that improving the quality of life for the rural Uruguayan worker would improve production for Uruguayan ranching and agriculture.

The commanding personality and educator

It was not only on his home turf of San Pedro de Timote that Gallinal gave many a lecture on topics in which he was well versed, such as the history of the Corriedale sheep. He greatly enjoyed imparting his knowledge through teaching and public speaking. In Cerro Colorado, the town closest to San Pedro, he would eagerly volunteer to substitute teach at the local school. He

⁶¹ On international visitors to San Pedro de Timote, see: Gallinal de Bonner (1990). De Torres Álvarez quotes an *Asociación Rural del Uruguay* report on a 1928 visit of British members of parliament while Alberto's father Alejandro was running the ranch (De Torres Álvarez 2017, p. 119).

was frequently invited to speak by organizations, especially rural associations, around Uruguay and even Argentina, and commanded captive audiences. Gallinal was respected as a man of knowledge in part because of how he transmitted his knowledge. He was commanding both through his six-foot-four frame and in his rich bass voice, which he used in his hobby as a singer (among his correspondents was José Soler, the famous Spanish-Uruguayan tenor). The observation that people stopped in their tracks and paid attention to Gallinal when he entered a room has been stressed to me by numerous informants; they offer his temperament as one explanation for his ability to gain support for MEVIR and for organizing MEVIR's early employees around a common cause.

The local booster

Much of Gallinal's social work concentrated on his hometown of Cerro Colorado. His local contributions ranged from small donations to public works projects. Throughout his papers are notes from area residents expressing their gratitude to Gallinal for small but meaningful gestures such as helping provide a job reference or donating clothing. Visitors coming today from Montevideo to San Pedro will turn left off Ruta 7 at a bell tower, Cerro Colorado's most recognizable monument and seemingly out of place in an Uruguayan townscape. This is a carillon which Gallinal ordered in 1954 and for which he had the bells shipped directly from the Petit and Fritsen Foundry in the Netherlands. It is the only example of its type in Uruguay, and one of very few present in Latin America. Before it fell into disrepair following Gallinal's death, *cerro coloradeños* heard a regular program on the bells that combined folklore, religious music, and the national anthem.⁶² Not coincidentally, these three musical genres happen to mirror Gallinal's agrarian, Catholic, and patriotic values that form the backbone of MEVIR.

⁶² Ministerio de Educación y Cultura (2022).



Figure 7: These prototype homes built in Cerro Colorado in the mid-1960s helped to convince Alberto Gallinal of the viability of the idea that became MEVIR (photo by author, 1 July 2022).

The polymath, polyglot, and voracious reader

In the final years of Gallinal's life, his family sold the core part of San Pedro de Timote, and today it serves as a tourist *estancia* accessible as a weekend getaway from Montevideo. San

Pedro is very much worth a visit not just as a place to relax, to understand how commercial ranching worked in twentieth century Uruguay, or to admire the ensemble of neo-Spanish colonial style buildings around two central courtyards. In the library, a visitor can most clearly see the breadth of Gallinal's erudition. Gallinal was a voracious reader, and not just on matters pertaining to ranching. At San Pedro, he would retire every evening immediately after dinner and he would ask not to be disturbed as he went about his reading agenda.⁶³ The books and bound periodicals in his library span topics from world history to botany to political commentary and even to obstetrics. He was an avid reader of *National Geographic* and made a point of visiting places he read about in the magazine while on his travels. The wide range of tomes is matched by the mix of languages, with (in roughly decreasing order) Spanish, English, French, Portuguese, German, Italian, and Dutch all present. Correspondence with international book sellers appears frequently in his papers, and Gallinal, on trips abroad, would bring back suitcases full of books. Housing, however, does not seem to have been a niche within his book collection, nor does it appear that Gallinal drew direct inspiration for MEVIR from any specific texts he read. Despite the lacuna of materials on housing, it is relevant that the breadth of Gallinal's reading made him aware of currents of thought at the time and it likely sharpened his sense of which parts of his ideas were the most feasible, albeit indirectly.

The world traveler and Kiwiphile

One of Gallinal's favorite destinations was New Zealand.⁶⁴ He took multiple agricultural reconnaissance trips there, including as a detour from his honeymoon in 1935. As he expressed in talks around Uruguay, Gallinal saw in New Zealand much of what he wanted Uruguay to

⁶³ Interview with Susana Gallinal, 10 March 2022.

⁶⁴ There is considerable literature on the comparative development of Uruguay and New Zealand. An example in geography is Kirby (1988).

become.⁶⁵ Both countries were dominated by a pastoral economy, but New Zealand had more productive livestock and higher indicators of socioeconomic wellbeing. Seeing a pastoral landscape with less human misery was enough to motivate Gallinal that this was possible in Uruguay too. Gallinal expressed his admiration for New Zealand in many letters. He also took extra care to stay in touch with Kiwi correspondents, often inviting them to San Pedro, but it is in a short 1951 book *Enseñanzas de un rápido viaje a Nueva Zelanda* published by the Asociación Rural del Uruguay (Rural Association of Uruguay), or ARU, where he lays out these observations most methodically.⁶⁶

The cosmopolitan correspondent

In addition to reading widely, Gallinal kept many correspondents in Uruguay, and also from abroad. Their composition was drawn mainly from various trips he took to learn about the latest technologies in ranching and to be a judge at livestock expositions. Starting around 1966, Gallinal began including news of his rural housing efforts in letters that were otherwise mainly about the details of daily ranch life or the minutiae of Uruguayan politics.⁶⁷ His correspondence sought to cultivate support for his ideas. Sympathetic Uruguayan interlocutors helped with their ability to offer political advice and contributions of their time and effort. In his letters to foreign interlocutors, where he needed to lay out the Uruguayan context, he most clearly explained that his vision of MEVIR was a nation-building project in a cultural sense, beyond the geographical fact that it was set to extend across the entirety of Uruguayan territory and the political fact that it would need to interface with national-level institutions. One frequent international correspondent

⁶⁵ New Zealand was a former British dominion, and Uruguay was a part of Britain's informal empire. On Uruguay's place in Britain's informal empire, see Winn (1976).

⁶⁶ Gallinal Heber (1951).

⁶⁷ See for example a letter from Gallinal to Brazil's eventual Minister of Agriculture Luís Fernando Cirne Lima on 23 December 1966 (unnumbered page in AGN box 360): "Our political movement refuses to holster its flags and we have turned it into a Social Movement to eradicate Unhealthy housing in Uruguay. More than 1000 colleagues are currently taking the census of these homes and we are preparing the law" (translation mine).

was Gustavo Pueyrredón, an Argentine cartoonist and Gallinal's dear friend. In the early 1970s, they co-authored a book whose content caricatured a run-of-the-mill public worker in what they saw as the byzantine bureaucracy of the Uruguayan state.⁶⁸ *The Aventuras y desventuras de Angel Villalba y otros* was a chance for Gallinal to brainstorm ideas about office management as he fashioned his own workplace in MEVIR.

FOUR FOUNDATIONAL EXPERIENCES

In addition to these traits, values, interests, and patterns in Gallinal's life, there are four experiences Gallinal lived from the late 1950s to the mid 1960s that were vital in his ability to conceive of and execute MEVIR. Each of these efforts portends various key facets of MEVIR. The formation of MEVIR drew on the legal, technical, geographical, and organizational expertise Gallinal amassed in these endeavors. They helped him envision more clearly what MEVIR would look like, and they strengthened his conviction that building a nationwide institution to improve the quality and quantity of housing for rural laborers was feasible.

The 1959 flood relief efforts

Floods wreaked havoc across Central Uruguay in March and April of 1959. Rains were so heavy that stored waters even overflowed the Rincón del Bonete Dam, a project started by engineers from Nazi Germany in 1933 and completed by Americans in 1945. Relief efforts were led by General Óscar Gestido, a Colorado. Gallinal was also involved. Seven years later, he reflected while on the campaign trail that he "learned many useful things from the floods", namely that Uruguay "truly has moral reserves", and he believed in people's capacity to work

⁶⁸ Pueyrredon and Gallinal (1975). V.S. Naipaul's April 1974 dispatch from Uruguay gives a glimpse of this bureaucratic suffocation (Naipaul, 1974).

together to build things, especially across party lines.⁶⁹ His cross-party relationship with Gestido, as discussed later in this chapter, proved pivotal to MEVIR's founding.

The Artigas Bicentenary Commission for rural schoolhouses

A built environment project in which Gallinal played an even greater role was the Artigas Bicentenary Commission.⁷⁰ Presided by Gallinal, the commission built 228 rural schoolhouses across Uruguay from 1961 to 1972, following the pioneering reinforced ceramic vault design of architect Eladio Dieste, some of whose work has since been given UNESCO World Heritage Status. While the flood recovery was focused on one area of the country, the Artigas Bicentenary Commission was a preview of what would become MEVIR's future at a national scale. As with MEVIR, the bicentenary commission also underscored Gallinal's belief in providing as many resources as possible to remote rural areas as a means for them to develop further and to deter migration to the cities. Unlike MEVIR, however, rural schools had long existed in Uruguay. Through the bicentenary commission, Gallinal was helping to strengthen an existing institution, rather than build a new one from scratch.

The Uruguayan Secretariat for Wool

A third antecedent bolstered Gallinal's confidence in MEVIR's administrative, legal, and financial capabilities. Just before Cerro Colorado on Ruta 7 lies another institution where Gallinal left his mark. Hemmed in by eucalyptus plantations is the entrance to the Research and Experimental Station of the *Secretariado Uruguayo de Lana* (Uruguayan Secretariat of Wool), or SUL.⁷¹ The SUL was founded in May 1966 by Gallinal and other sheep producers. Importantly,

⁶⁹ *Extra* (1966).

⁷⁰ José Gervasio Artigas (1764-1850) is widely considered to be Uruguay's chief national hero and founding father. His name appears throughout Uruguayan public space, from countless statues and streets to the country's main teacher training institute.

⁷¹ Thomas Tomkinson (1804-1879), the British businessman who lends his name to the road on the outskirts of Montevideo where MEVIR's supply shed is located, was responsible for the introduction of eucalyptus to Uruguay, though long before it became a plantation crop for export.

it was defined by the state as an organization of “private law and public interest”, the same status subsequently given to MEVIR. Additionally, the funding model for the SUL portended MEVIR’s means of financing. SUL has been supported since its inception by a “mobile cash benefit of 0.3 percent of the free-on-board value of [Uruguay’s] wool exports” as stipulated by law. Beyond these legal and financial implications, the SUL, as relayed by his grandson Rafael Sanguinetti, a MEVIR board member in the late 1980s and early 1990s, showed Gallinal that institutions could be created and supported by the state, while remaining subject to less bureaucracy than state entities under public law.⁷²

Prototype homes in Cerro Colorado

Down the hill from Cerro Colorado’s carillon is the site of Gallinal’s prototype homes. Of all his local social interventions, these had the most tangible consequences for MEVIR. Gallinal, evidenced by thank you notes in his papers dating as far back as the 1940s, had occasionally helped find homes for neighbors in need on a one-off basis. Nonetheless, housing did not come to the forefront of his local agenda until the 1960s. While the broader national specter of *rancheríos* loomed in the background, there was a related local problem sitting right in front of Gallinal. Many workers who retired from San Pedro, and who had lived on the grounds while employed, did not have a home into which to move once they retired. In 1966, Gallinal funded six new homes destined for these retired workers. He did this using the help of an architect friend with the surname Fachero, who was trained in the Dieste school and adept at building with brick. These homes were not just a chance to do good for a few locals. They served as a test site for Gallinal’s national ambitions. If he made his housing experiment work in Cerro Colorado, Gallinal believed, he would make it work nationally.⁷³ Gallinal realized that by using brick

⁷² Interview with Rafael Sanguinetti, 2 June 2022.

⁷³ See for example Gallinal’s letter to the chief of police for Florida Department on 9 March 1967 (AGN 360.586).

sourced from the immediate vicinity (known as *ladrillo de campo*), you could significantly lower costs. He also recognized that volunteer labor done by the eventual residents of the homes and supervised by a skilled construction worker, would hasten the building process, lower costs, build a sense of solidarity, and give the participants and their families a new skill. This idea that anyone can become a mason, if they have a professional teaching them the trade as they go along is a *sine qua non* of MEVIR to this day. Gallinal was satisfied with the results and he highlighted the success of this pilot program when ushering ranchers and politicians aboard the cause of MEVIR.⁷⁴

GALLINAL'S VISION FOR MEVIR

Led by Gallinal's vision, MEVIR started with clear guidelines and directives. It knew from the beginning what both the product and process would be. MEVIR was to provide detached one-story single-family dwellings, ones made of locally sourced brick, in order to house working families in either dispersed rural areas or preexisting small towns of under several thousand people, located across the entirety of Uruguay beyond Montevideo. The homes would be made by the families themselves under the supervision of skilled construction workers, an architect, and a social worker. Participating families would contribute through sweat equity and would also pay a small percentage of the construction cost before becoming owners. This percentage, determined by MEVIR, would be recouped in the form of rent payments to the institution along approximately twenty years. The land on which to build would be sought through donations and bequests. The remainder of the costs would be borne by a government tax

⁷⁴ See for example an undated MEVIR memorandum presumed to be in late 1967 (AGN 15.7.6).

on livestock exports. MEVIR would oversee this entire process, from the decision of where to build the homes to the collection of rent payments through to an eventual signing of deeds.

This product required three legs on which to stand.⁷⁵ If one of them fell, the whole project would collapse with it. MEVIR required a commitment from the government to donate a percentage of livestock exports as codified by law and the support of ranchers to approve this tax and, when appropriate, to donate portions of their land for the construction of homes. MEVIR's stability was also contingent upon the formation of a workplace and an institution, one governed by an honorary board of directors and staffed by proficient technical experts, both in the Montevideo office and on its building sites in the interior. Finally, the nascent organization needed the willingness and sacrifice of the participating families to contribute construction hours and work together with their neighbors. This last point is crucial. MEVIR has always been an entirely opt-in program for residents.

Gallinal's belief in people's ability to work together was not simply a nod to the adage, "many hands make light work." In a longer-term view, Gallinal considered mutual aid work a way of improving life trajectories and of integrating the rural poor into wider Uruguayan society. Rural Uruguay was a much more closed place in the 1960s than it is today, when motorcycles, cellphones, and internet connections bring people living and working in remote places into closer connection with national and international happenings. In Uruguay's sparsely populated ranching zones, the working poor usually lived in very isolated dwellings. Rancheríos, while they may have been discrete settlements in that one rancherío could be demarcated from another one nearby, were dispersed groupings of houses. Everyday mobility often required traversing long distances on foot, bicycle, or horseback. Moreover, rancheríos tended to be little more than a

⁷⁵ This idea of three legs was most explicitly stated to me by retired MEVIR architect Ricardo Nopitsch (interview, 10 June 2022).

collection of simple domestic dwellings. Aside from the occasional schoolhouse, there were few sites of state intervention such as post offices or town halls, or civil society organizations, things like social clubs.⁷⁶ Discussing this phenomenon, Mike Brennan, a retired MEVIR agronomist and orange producer in Salto, refers to the phrase “*cada uno a su chacra*”, which means “everyone to their cottage”.⁷⁷ The implication here is that the two main spheres in which ranch workers existed were the ranch and the home. Further, the remote areas of rural Uruguay lacked a third space that gave people meaning and connections beyond work and family. In sum, people were isolated physically and socially in the places where MEVIR planned to intervene. In its efforts to overcome this isolation, MEVIR instituted mutual aid, using this as a conduit not just for building brick-and-mortar homes and lowering labor costs, but also as a means for constructing communities, ones that expanded beyond existing work and family ties.

The conception of the construction site and eventual neighborhood of homes as a setting for social interaction was instrumental in Gallinal’s intention to create new communities. The participant families would not know which house would become theirs until drawing lots during the final weeks of construction. This leveled the playing field in a radical way. Not only would families be incentivized to work for each other rather than just for themselves, but every family would have equal stature in the process. The distribution of ranching labor in Uruguay is much more complex than a simple dichotomy between owner and peon. On a large and meticulously

⁷⁶ These patterns were not necessarily true in most parts of Canelones Department, which showed a higher degree of commercial agriculture, especially fruits and vegetables, than the usual. Rafael Sanguinetti notes that Canelones had a much stronger tradition of rural social clubs (interview, 2 June 2022). When driving through rural Canelones today, these sorts of spaces are indeed more evident in the landscape. It is thus significant that MEVIR intervened little in Canelones before the 1980s, even though the department’s location closer to Montevideo would have simplified logistics and lowered construction costs (see: Ares and Pini (1987) and Lopez Gallero (1998)). A document dated 9 August 1974 from MEVIR lists 32 localities in which MEVIR was building or planning to build. None were in Canelones. All the other interior departments were represented except for Flores and Maldonado (AGN 15.5.8). Not unrelated, a disproportionately small amount of Gallinal’s rural interlocutors were based in Canelones.

⁷⁷ Interview with Mike Brennan, 15 July 2022.

managed ranch such as San Pedro, there were over a dozen different occupations with differing skill levels and gradations of financial compensation.⁷⁸ While all families participating in MEVIR could be considered poor, in need of improved housing in an absolute sense, in a relative one there was often a great deal of heterogeneity and inequality. Mutual aid ensured that a ranch foreman, a blacksmith, a common ranchhand, and a schoolhouse cook would all build and receive the same home. It also assumed an equal status between men and women, as both adult partners in a family would be expected to contribute to construction.⁷⁹

The idea of human betterment went in tandem with increased socialization, and for Gallinal, the home itself was the place that best allowed for this. MEVIR does not give people housing. It makes them work for it. Gallinal believed that the act of working to build a home would make the eventual residents value it more, and they would then apply that work ethic in other aspects of their lives. Through work and through socialization, MEVIR participants would improve their lot in life. A new house signifies the start of life changes, MEVIR architect Federico Becerra notes.⁸⁰ Whether these changes are envisioned or not before families move in, MEVIR facilitates new ways for families to conceive of their lives. At its essence, MEVIR is a political form of human growth.

Gallinal also conceived of MEVIR as a way of transforming place. This was true at the scale of individual localities, which would see concrete economic benefits and a renewed sense of pride from having MEVIR homes, but also at the national scale. There is a reason Gallinal focused his efforts on improving rural housing rather than addressing urban housing concerns, at a time when informal settlements had begun to proliferate on the outskirts of Montevideo. He

⁷⁸ The boxes of financial ledgers from San Pedro de Timote in Gallinal's papers illustrate this.

⁷⁹ Despite Gallinal's political differences with *batllistas*, an argument can be made that MEVIR's equalizing nature ties back to the ideals of *batllismo*.

⁸⁰ This topic came up in various conversations with Becerra on our trips to and from Capilla del Sauce.

saw the rural Uruguayan landscape as a productive one and one worth going to great lengths not just keep it home, but also to make it a better place for the people who called it home. MEVIR represents an explicit attempt to stem the tide of rural-to-urban migration. An anti-urban Romanticism sits implicitly within Gallinal's agrarian vision. His worldview revealed a love for the land and the people who worked it. It also included a notion of rural social relations in which he found it difficult to conceive of non-agrarian occupations in remote areas. The next chapter will show how this has become an important critique of MEVIR over time, especially from within the institution.

VISION INTO ACTION

Turning ideas into action was not quick and seamless. It required building allies and overcoming widespread skepticism. Gallinal faced no shortage of doubters and apathy. Among ranchers, many struggled to see what about MEVIR held any benefit for them, and some feared that MEVIR would urbanize people, making them less likely to want to do rural labor. Among politicians, some of these critiques came down to simple jealousy and others were motivated by ideology or political jockeying. Most skeptics were simply dismissive though of what they saw as Gallinal's wild optimism and overly long-term thinking.⁸¹ The biggest sticking point was doubt over whether people would want to work on their homes. These doubts were not unfounded. Among the participants, there were challenges. Moving to a MEVIR home would mark a wholesale shift in people's domestic life, and mutual aid was a foreign concept to the individualist mindset of the gaucho spirit pervasive across rural Uruguay. Many were hesitant to sign up for such drastic changes in lifestyle. The MEVIR social worker Rosario Bisio recounts a

⁸¹ See for example Gallinal's letter to Wilson Ferreira Aldunate, 11 Dec 1967, in the collection of Rafael Sanguinetti.

preliminary visit in the 1980s to Cuchilla de Guaviyú, in the remotest throes of Salto Department.⁸² A man greeted her with a *facón*, or large hunting knife, and threatened her. She was able to de-escalate the situation and clarify misinformation the man had received. The man and his wife later came to live happily in a MEVIR home (as Chapter Three discusses, the countering of misinformation remains a major preoccupation of MEVIR staff).

Just as a series of foundational experiences bolstered Gallinal's conviction in the viability of MEVIR, there was also a succession of events or processes which were essential in taking the organization from an idea with a prototype to a fully-fledged and nationally respected institution.

"I don't want to work with numbers"

Gallinal was the fourth-most voted presidential candidate in Uruguay's 1966 general election. As such, he was in line for a major political appointment. Óscar Gestido, the winner, with whom Gallinal had developed a strong working relationship since the 1959 floods, offered him the presidency of the *Banco de la República Oriental del Uruguay* (Bank of the Oriental Republic of Uruguay), or the BROU, the national bank. This was, and still is, an extremely prestigious post. Gallinal declined by saying "I don't want to work with numbers, I want to do social work." He asked Gestido if he would support instead his efforts to start an institution with the aim of eradicating *rancheríos*. Gestido obliged.⁸³

The MEVIR law

MEVIR as an entity is the result of a law, and a well-made one, which contains only four articles. As multiple MEVIR employees commented during this research, the juridical strength and simplicity of this law is the base on which MEVIR rests to this day. It was approved in a

⁸² Interview with Rosario Bisio, 12 November 2022.

⁸³ This well-documented story was told to me in these same words by Susana Gallinal (interview, 10 March 2022). See also Gallinal's letter to Carlos Asiain Marquez on 17 April 1967 (AGN 360.646).

rendición de cuentas (a special legislative session on accountability) in December 1967. This means it was batched together with a larger package of bills, which were brought to the legislature before the summer recess. It was not voted on as a specific legislative topic. This political strategy was instrumental in avoiding additional and close scrutiny of MEVIR. Friends of Gallinal's in the legislature, including Salvador "Pocho" García Pintos, helped ensure that MEVIR was approved.⁸⁴

Commissions at different scales

Building loyalty at the national, departmental, and local scales expedited this effort. Gallinal recruited enthusiastic collaborators up and down the country and he worked to form honorary commissions at all three scales. A variety of professions were represented in the national commission, countering the notion that it was merely a club of like-minded ranchers. The departmental commissions served as scouts to inform the national commission (who commanded resources) which locales were most in need of improved housing, and in which locales the improvement of housing would be the most feasible. The local commissions were charged with finding the appropriate land (usually donated by ranchers in the early days) and with identifying specific families for the program. This scale is where the link between the service provider and its recipients was strongest.

Pueblo Celeste

The earliest MEVIR homes quelled most of the remaining skepticism. Once politicians saw that participants trusted MEVIR, they too trusted MEVIR. One important case was Pueblo Celeste, located in a sheep-raising zone of Salto, a department with an especially active commission. Pueblo Celeste is where the second nucleus, or neighborhood, of MEVIR homes

⁸⁴ Interview with Elvirita Gallinal and Guillermo Sanguinetti, 30 June 2022.

was built, during the years 1970 to 1972. Contrary to early critiques that MEVIR nuclei would be de facto company towns, the sixteen participant families came from working on many different cattle and sheep estancias in the central part of Salto Department.⁸⁵ Moreover, when evaluating land donations from ranchers for MEVIR, Gallinal refused offers of land near the core of the estancias they owned.⁸⁶ For Gallinal, lands less tied to work meant increased emancipation of employees from their employers. As the leader of Pueblo Celeste's local commission, local rancher Eduardo Muguera was a crucial actor. Gallinal carefully chose the people who would execute the earliest MEVIR projects, and Muguera was a person of great trust. In a 1971 letter to his nephew Luis Pedro Saenz, Gallinal expressed gratitude for Muguera, but he lamented that there were not more people like him in the rest of the country.⁸⁷ He had long wanted his rancherío eradication efforts to be supported by the ranching and commercial agriculture sectors at large, but he was having to settle for the valiant, fanfare-free efforts of committed actors on the local scale.

Establishing a Workplace

As MEVIR began to be established, both as a central office in Montevideo and as a series of construction sites around the country, Gallinal infused a set of core values into the nascent institution. While it was officially a secular organization, where Gallinal discouraged any discussion of religion or politics, he was explicit about advocating for solidarity, sacrifice, and ethical obligation to the less fortunate, values that he privately saw as Christian ones. Tied to this was a commitment to financial austerity. He refused reimbursement for such things as his meals and transportation to be paid on the organization's accounts, seeing these as one less brick going

⁸⁵ Interview with Eduardo Muguera, 11 November 2022.

⁸⁶ Interview with Eduardo Muguera, 11 November 2022.

⁸⁷ Letter from Gallinal to Luis Pedro Saenz, 17 June 1971, collection of Rafael Sanguinetti.

into building a home for a family who needed it.⁸⁸ Every Monday morning, he would arrive at the office at 8:00 AM to give his orders, then he would leave for other meetings in Montevideo. He followed this habitual pattern before returning to San Pedro, making trips to MEVIR sites, or tending to other business in the interior for the remainder of the week. As Alejandro Sandobal, MEVIR's director of purchasing and supplies (and the longest-serving employee in the history of the institution), related to me, "He gave his guidelines and standards at the beginning of the week" and then he left us to get our work done because he trusted us.⁸⁹ Micromanaging was not a word in Gallinal's vocabulary.

Gallinal's disdain for bureaucracy, evident in his satirical book with Gustavo Pueyrredón, was also part and parcel of how he organized MEVIR as a workplace. Being set up as a parastatal organization allowed it to avoid lots of regulatory hoops that organizations more closely-tied to the state could not.⁹⁰ As much as he distrusted bureaucrats, Gallinal trusted MEVIR as a process and as an ensemble of people in clearly defined roles. According to Magela Vicentino, one of MEVIR's first social workers, Gallinal's directive at the beginning inspired the MEVIR staff and the many volunteers around the country. His desire infused respect, belonging, and a love of the institution. This was transferred from the top down. During MEVIR's early days, when it was still a small institution (all of the employees could fit in one office room), it was easier to *poner la camiseta*, a football analogy that means to wear the team shirt.⁹¹ This small scale meant that there was a very intimate process of training employees, where these sentiments and social and technical know-how were passed down. The workplace was (and still

⁸⁸ Interview with Magela Vicentino, 22 June 2022.

⁸⁹ Interview with Alejandro Sandobal, 1 June 2022.

⁹⁰ Interview with Daniel García Trovero, 15 February 2022; interview with Alejandro Sandobal, 1 June 2022; interview with Rafael Sanguinetti, 2 June 2022.

⁹¹ Interview with Alejandro Sandobal, 1 June 2022; interview with Magela Vicentino, 22 June 2022.

is) distinguished not just by this sense of belief, but also by what it meant to be a MEVIR employee in practical terms. Gallinal insisted that MEVIR pay higher than average salaries for the jobs it offered, and that it limit office workers to six-hour days, so that employees could spend more time with their families or on other personal projects. He believed these incentives would make his employees want to work harder and achieve something better than a standard state employee.⁹²

CONCLUSION: GALLINAL AS AN AUTHOR OF PLACE

This chapter analyzes the agency of Alberto Gallinal in the creation of MEVIR, making empirical contributions to Uruguayan history through interviews and previously unused archival documents. In a broader sense, it argues that individuals matter to institutions and to the making of place. Following the lead of geographer Marwyn Samuels, Gallinal is an “author of place” par excellence.⁹³ As a project to transform the physical-material landscape of Uruguay’s interior, MEVIR was a good idea on its own terms. And Gallinal used his many forms of capital to make it happen. His understanding of and love for rural Uruguay as a place was fundamental to how he went about this. MEVIR stems from Gallinal’s vision and his execution, but he is not the organization’s only author. Following Samuels’s assertion, MEVIR has also been co-authored by its employees and by the now over 33,000 participant families, people who have actively sought to better their lives by building homes together. The remaining chapters of this thesis move forward in time from Gallinal to focus more on the role of these employees and participants.

⁹² Interview with Magela Vicentino, 22 June 2022.

⁹³ Samuels (1979), p. 67: “The biography of landscape has as its central concern the role of individuals—authors—in the making of landscape. Its central geographical task is simply to follow through on Hartshorne’s complaint that geographers...have underestimated the importance of key individuals and ‘thousands of lesser figures (who have) left the mark of their leadership on the geography of every country, even if their names are no longer known’.”

Nevertheless, as I will illustrate, Gallinal's vision and legacy continues to motivate and define MEVIR to this day.

Gallinal reminds students and geographers to look for place authorship all around us, in the field and in the library. He is arguably Uruguay's foremost author of *rural* place. However, he did have counterparts, although they were usually working decades before him, both along the Uruguayan coastline and in the capital Montevideo. These include Francisco Piria (1847-1933), the namesake and developer of the beach resort of Piriapolis, and Emilio Reus (1858-1891), the Madrid-born land speculator. The tenement housing built by Reus in two Montevideo neighborhoods provided homes for legions of immigrant and poor families in the late nineteenth century. One of these tenements inspired the lyrics of one of Uruguay's most famous tangos. They remain an important part of the urban fabric today.

Chapter Two

“Mutar sin perder su esencia”: An Institutional History of MEVIR

MEVIR has adapted and witnessed internal debates about what services to provide and how to do this, but it has never strayed from its core objective of improving the quality of life for the poor in rural parts of Uruguay’s interior, one to be met through physical-territorial interventions centered on housing and habitat. Drawing mainly on interviews with current and former MEVIR employees, this chapter recounts MEVIR’s institutional story in two parts. The first is a chronological account of the main periods in MEVIR’s history and the events that precipitated important shifts in MEVIR’s operations. The second part is a thematic account of the balance between change and continuity in seven different aspects of MEVIR as an organization and an actor in Uruguayan territory: the office workplace, construction sites, urban issues, politics, finance, selection and research, and MEVIR’s expansion of offerings. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the continued centrality within MEVIR of the always present, yet dynamic, notions of “rural”, “dwelling”, and “poverty”.

A CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY

MEVIR During the Dictatorship

If the first salient period in MEVIR’s history is its founding, discussed in the previous chapter, the next period coincides neatly with Uruguay’s civic-military dictatorship, which lasted from 1973-1985. During this period, MEVIR built slowly, steadily, and quietly across the country, inaugurating its two thousandth home in November 1983. A lack of financial dynamism, something that characterized the dictatorship in general, marks this period. The now-retired

construction foreman, Ramón Castro, who joined MEVIR in 1978, recalls that during this time there was a lack of funding to do much beyond the basics.⁹⁴

In a 1987 SWOT analysis commissioned by MEVIR, the accountants José Antonio Ares and José Antonio Pini preface their study by saying that in its first twenty years, MEVIR had not undergone important changes with respect to the mechanisms that regulated it. Nor had there been impactful change in the makeup of its directors, except for Gallinal's recent retirement.⁹⁵ Ares and Pini moreover note that the executive branch of Uruguay's government had shown no interest either in intervening in the operations of the board (the national commission) or the appointment of its members. Any specific difficulties in MEVIR came from a conjunctural lack of financial help for national political economy reasons rather than reasons attributable to the organization itself.⁹⁶

Ricardo Nopitsch started at MEVIR as a field architect in 1980, before serving in administrative roles on the architecture side of the organization, during the period from 1985 until his retirement in 2013. He recalls that the beginnings of MEVIR were very slow.⁹⁷ He remembers ranchers and farmers in the early and mid 1980s asking to raise taxes on themselves so that there would be more support for MEVIR.⁹⁸ Given that the *Rendición de Cuentas* (the annual government accountability report) derogated in 1975 the taxes foreseen in MEVIR's

⁹⁴ Interview with Ramón Castro, 10 November 2022.

⁹⁵ Rafael Sanguinetti, who was on MEVIR's board at the time, notes the importance of Ares and Pini as outside observers (interview with Rafael Sanguinetti, 20 December 2023). This document was the first time, and to my knowledge still the only occasion, when there has been a serious external review of MEVIR. At the time of Ares and Pini's analysis, Gallinal remained president in a ceremonial role. But José María Mieres Muró, who had been the vice president, became MEVIR's de facto president, on account of Gallinal's poor health.

⁹⁶ Ares and Pini (1987), p. 3.

⁹⁷ Nopitsch notes that while MEVIR homes took longer to build than they currently do, they still took considerably less time to build than housing cooperatives in Montevideo, which took around eight years (interview, 10 June 2022). The duration of construction is one of a few important differences between MEVIR and cooperatives. Others include how each model deals with the question of ownership and the nature of decision making.

⁹⁸ Interview with Ricardo Nopitsch, 10 June 2022.

original plans from 1967, and replaced them with an annual subsidy, this advocacy was understandable.⁹⁹ The political scientist, Adolfo Garcé, in his summary history of MEVIR, one commissioned by the institution to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary, confirms that a budget law (Article 657-663 of Law 15.809) was approved in 1986. This law levied 0.2 percent on the transfer of primary agriculture and ranching products. And in 1987, a tax was created on properties larger than five thousand hectares.¹⁰⁰ Garcé echoes that MEVIR went through moments of significant financial restriction, derived in essence from a series of regulatory changes.

In my conversations with MEVIR staff, and with others who recall this period, it stands out to me how few people use the word “*dictadura*” to describe this time. Nor do they attribute much agency to the dictatorship regime in MEVIR’s activities. Referring to the dictatorship as simply the 1970s or early 1980s is more common. Whatever the reasons these people have for glossing over an extremely dark chapter in Uruguayan history, the point with respect to MEVIR is that the dictatorship did not provide the organization with additional resources (beyond what was already foreseen). The dictatorship left it to run its course, electing not to get involved with removing board members or appointing new ones.¹⁰¹ In the larger panorama of Cold War history in Uruguay, the MEVIR example points to the reality that the dictatorship was a grim time, not only socially, but also economically. Economic vibrancy is not a phrase that comes to mind for this period of Uruguay’s development.

⁹⁹ Garcé (2017), p. 14.

¹⁰⁰ Garcé (2017) p. 14. He does not note the financial amount of the 1987 tax.

¹⁰¹ The fact that Gallinal was a tacit supporter of the 1980 plebiscite to continue the military regime could play a factor in why the dictatorship let MEVIR continue to run its course. This raises the counterfactual point of whether a housing program with a similar impact started by the Left would have been dismantled for ideological reasons.

A Return to Democracy and the Leadership of Mieres (1985-2003)

Uruguay's return to democratic rule in 1985 coincided with the decline of Alberto Gallinal's health. Gallinal officially stepped down as president of the MEVIR board around this time, though he continued to attend inaugurations in his wheelchair into the early 1990s. José María Mieres Muró, the vice president of the board of MEVIR, who had been named to it for his experience as director of the *Instituto Nacional de Viviendas Economicas* (National Institute of Affordable Housing), or INVE, took over as the president of MEVIR, with procedural approval from the President of the Republic, Julio María Sanguinetti (no relation to Rafael Sanguinetti). Alberto Gallinal's daughter Susana highlights that MEVIR inaugurations are what kept her father alive during his final eight and a half years, ones he spent in a wheelchair.¹⁰² Democracy also brought about the first major acceleration in MEVIR's patterns of building, fomented by increasing funds from the *Banco Hipotecario del Uruguay* (Mortgage Bank of Uruguay), or BHU, in the aim of reaching five thousand homes, and through the 1986 and 1987 agriculture-related taxes noted by Garcé. In 1988, the BHU president, the accountant Julio Kneit, when he saw MEVIR's capacity to execute, offered to fund five additional homes for each one built using MEVIR's own resources (the 0.2 percent tax on agriculture and ranching transactions).¹⁰³ Amid considerable debate within MEVIR, Mieres accepted the offer Kneit had made, and MEVIR then began a period of intensification from which it has never looked back.

The 1987 SWOT analysis helps to make sense of this conjuncture in MEVIR's history. The study came about from reflections within MEVIR's national commission on the extent to which the institution should grow and expand from its original objectives.¹⁰⁴ The authors praise

¹⁰² Interview with Susana Gallinal, 10 March 2022.

¹⁰³ Pfeiff (2023).

¹⁰⁴ Ares and Pini (1987), pp. 4-5.

MEVIR's work as an example for Uruguay and other Latin American countries, especially its neighbors, but they warn their analysis will focus more on what the organization can do better than on its virtues. The analysis characterizes MEVIR as having become both more technical and organized, with a growth that has been planned in part and partly spontaneous. Ares and Pini interviewed 32 people directly or indirectly linked to MEVIR, including participants and members of local and departmental commissions. They attended various meetings of MEVIR employees and the national commission, and they also made use of technical and financial information that they were able to collect.¹⁰⁵

Underlying Ares and Pini's findings and recommendations are two main tensions: the present versus the future, and whether to adhere strictly to MEVIR's original objectives. Rafael Sanguinetti, a member of MEVIR's board at the time, recalls that the SWOT analysis insisted on the idea of delimiting the responsibilities of each person and any team. He remembers that Gallinal, as MEVIR president, "assigned, designated, and trusted".¹⁰⁶ In sum, he was a macromanager, not a micromanager. Signature recommendations made by Ares and Pini included restructuring of the organizational chart. This was to be guided by a coherent human resources policy, resulting in clearer demarcations of who was responsible for just what and when?

The study identified research on localities as an important shortcoming within MEVIR, although it remarked the Salto Departmental Commission was perhaps the exception. Ares and Pini urged that decisions about where to build needed to be professionalized and driven by data,

¹⁰⁵ Ares and Pini (1987), p. 1. While the document is extremely valuable, from an historian's point of view, it suffers from the limitation of not revealing the names of any individual employees or board members. This is an understandable feature of the study, given the exercise, and the value of providing a broad critique as opposed to placing blame on or attributing credit to particular individuals. Nevertheless, this intentional anonymity complicates the task of reconstructing the agency of specific people in MEVIR's evolution.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Rafael Sanguinetti, 2 June 2022.

in order to keep a coherent policy and strategy. They noted that MEVIR had had people try to do this to some degree. But such people had inevitably found themselves swept up in the demands of construction and were thus unable to continue research.¹⁰⁷ Ares and Pini recommended that research become its own division of the MEVIR office, one left independent from the social worker and architect divisions. In addition, the authors proposed that research should use in its methodologies consideration of the “socio-cultural”, the “demographic”, the “communitarian”, and the “technical-constructive”.¹⁰⁸

Ares and Pini also recommended more serious research, not just on where MEVIR should build, but on what it should build and for whom. They signal that MEVIR had not defined if it wanted to concentrate on nucleated housing, or whether it also wanted to expand to additional offerings, such isolated homes and the recycling of homes.¹⁰⁹ Their interviews and observations revealed that some people within MEVIR argued this was moving away from the goals for which the institution was created. External pressure stemming from the BHU and internal pressure coming from a majority of the board, who were striving to reach a goal of five thousand total homes by 1990, led MEVIR to build in larger towns. Such larger towns included a high number participants who were not rural wage laborers but held such jobs as public employees.¹¹⁰ In the aim to reach five thousand homes, Ares and Pini noted that it was logical for MEVIR to build in larger towns, as it meant more homes needed per plan. The authors likewise recognized the prudence of MEVIR concentrating its building in places where there was consistent labor, as opposed to places that may disappear on account of dwindling employment sources.¹¹¹ This

¹⁰⁷ Ares and Pini (1987), p. 13.

¹⁰⁸ Ares and Pini (1987), p. 36.

¹⁰⁹ Ares and Pini (1987), p. 51.

¹¹⁰ The geographer Álvaro López Gallero observed that public employees (who, I add, tend to have wider and denser social networks) are more likely to sign up for MEVIR than rural laborers because of information asymmetry, and because they are more used to working in teams (1998, p. 11).

¹¹¹ Ares and Pini (1987), p. 52.

preference would help assure MEVIR it did not lose support from a government that held the organization accountable for providing a return on investment. However, Ares and Pini insisted, like good management consultants, that these decisions be made using more formal measures of study and planning.

What happens after homes are completed and participants move in was also a concern to Ares and Pini. Though Ares and Pini do not state it explicitly, post-construction follow-up sends the message that MEVIR is both a construction company and an organization with social ends. Encouraging more “post-construction” work, Ares and Pini do state that MEVIR needs to help any participant to “use” their new habitat and consolidate their personal development as part of a community.¹¹² Another aspect of follow-up that caught Ares and Pini’s attention was the mounting debt of those participants who were late to make their rent payments. They critique MEVIR for having no analytic study of debt and default, attributing default both to participants’ financial problems and to MEVIR’s passivity.¹¹³

The lack of MEVIR’s insistence on debt collection speaks to Ares and Pini’s broader critiques of MEVIR’s finances. They state directly that MEVIR lacks an “objectively useful budget”.¹¹⁴ They conclude that a stance prevailed in the national commission at the time that finances only mattered in terms of adhering to norms and regulations. Most of MEVIR’s board thought the institution needed to build now, instead of saving funds and working more strategically about where and when to build later. MEVIR, thus, was working imperatively to cement its legacy to the country. The fear was it could otherwise become absorbed by the BHU

¹¹² Ares and Pini (1987), p. 15.

¹¹³ Ares and Pini (1987), p. 20, and Ares and Pini (1987), p. 60. They mentioned that almost thirty percent of participants were 90 days or more behind in payments. This amounted to 590 out of 2127 participants, with an average length of arrears of fourteen months. A total of seventeen percent of the participants were over 30 months behind in their payments.

¹¹⁴ Ares and Pini (1987), p. 21.

and cease to exist as an independent institution. Ares and Pini summarize this attitude as “*Hagamos todo lo que podamos hoy. Mañana es otro día*” (“Let’s do everything we can today. Tomorrow is another day”). This was a mindset, they note, that blocks strategic planning and clearly defined roles.¹¹⁵ In other words, although MEVIR had been achieving its original long-term vision at a steady pace, most actions were taken with only the short-term in mind, and thus the time had arrived to reevaluate MEVIR’s long-term goals.

Read today, two further management suggestions made by Ares and Pini portended subsequent debate in MEVIR. The first was to increase the weekly hours of MEVIR office employees from 30 to 40, instead of following a strategy of hiring more workers. This would make MEVIR feel and act less like a state-owned enterprise and more like a private company. This suggestion was not heeded and the MEVIR office remains a six-hour workplace to this day. The second recommendation was to eliminate departmental commissions, which Ares and Pini deemed unnecessary.¹¹⁶ Putting into question the department as Uruguay’s (and thus, MEVIR’s) default intermediate scale, they noted this elimination need not impede MEVIR’s development proceeding along some manner of regional or geographical lines. At the same time, the report stops short of offering more concrete proposals for how any reterritorializing of MEVIR could take place. Unlike Ares and Pini’s work hours suggestion, department commissions have since been eliminated.

Since the return to democracy, Uruguay has held a general election every five years. Each regime is referred to as a *quinquenio* (or five-year period). There is an historian’s trap where organizing information into *quinquenios* may preclude periodization along other logics.

Quinquenios as the temporal building block of contemporary Uruguayan democracy are not

¹¹⁵ Ares and Pini (1987), p. 47.

¹¹⁶ Ares and Pini (1987), p. 56.

unlike departments as the default spatial unit of analysis in this country, when other territorial logics may have more salience, in fact. Nevertheless, the term of Luis Alberto Lacalle (father of Uruguay's current president, Luis Lacalle Pou) as President of the Republic from 1990-1995 represents a key unit of analysis.

Beyond providing considerable support for MEVIR, Lacalle made housing a priority of his regime by creating a ministry of housing.¹¹⁷ As MEVIR's planning director Cristina Sierra notes in her 2020 master's thesis from the University of Barcelona (a course of study she was able to pursue remotely while continuing her duties with MEVIR), although various public bodies carrying out national housing policies had earlier existed, there was no organization that looked after the compliance of housing objectives with a holistic outlook and as its primary duty until the ministry was founded.¹¹⁸ While MEVIR remained a parastatal entity with its autonomous board, the creation of the MVOTMA meant that the BHU ceased to be MEVIR's main financial interlocutor. Once the five thousandth MEVIR home was inaugurated early in his term at Cerros de Vera, Salto, Lacalle committed to accelerate MEVIR's housing output under his watch. He saw to it that MEVIR would have the necessary funds.¹¹⁹ As related in an interview with the journalist Pablo Cohen, Lacalle knew the interior, and the concrete hopes MEVIR gave, and he thus supported MEVIR to the extent that its production almost doubled during his regime.¹²⁰ Between 1971 to 1989, MEVIR built 4,702 homes. During Lacalle's

¹¹⁷ In the mid 1960s Juan Pablo Terra had proposed a ministry of housing and urbanism as part of his work for the *Comisión de Inversiones y Desarrollo Económico* (Investment and Economic Development Commission), or CIDE, (Garcé 2017, p. 12). From 1990-2020, the ministry was called the *Ministerio de Vivienda, Ordenamiento Territorial y Medio Ambiente* (Ministry of Housing, Territorial Planning, and the Environment), or MVOTMA. In 2020, it changed its name to the *Ministerio de Vivienda y Ordenamiento Territorial* (Ministry of Housing and Territorial Planning), or MVOT, upon the creation of a separate environment ministry.

¹¹⁸ Sierra Gelber (2020), p. 45. Sierra began working at MEVIR in 2008.

¹¹⁹ Both Mike Brennan and Rafael Sanguinetti stressed Lacalle's influence as a major turning point for MEVIR in their interviews with me.

¹²⁰ Cohen (2023), pp. 17-18. Lacalle describes MEVIR as a "manchita blanca" (white stain) in the small towns and emphasizes that good housing improves the quality of life in these places.

quinquenio, it built 4,687 homes.¹²¹ Two other factors likely played into the degree of Lacalle’s commitment. First, he knew Gallinal well, in part given they shared strong ties to the Cerro Colorado area.¹²² Second, a commitment came because MEVIR, as Lacalle tells Cohen, was already “*una obra redonda*” (a well-done and complete work), meaning that the opportunity cost of government support became lower than for less-proven programs.¹²³

Mieres kept Gallinal’s work going, although there were important distinctions between the two men and their leadership styles. Mieres was a trained architect and he had a more explicitly architectural vision for MEVIR.¹²⁴ Alejandro Sandobal, the purchasing and supplies director, recalls Gallinal as a friendly man, but somebody who was always serious and very correct. Mieres, who went by the nickname “Pirincho”, on the other hand, was much more gregarious, and a bon vivant. “If you invited Mieres to an *asado* (barbecue), he would come”.¹²⁵ Daniel García Trovero, an anthropologist by training, was a member of MEVIR’s national commission between 1992 and 2005 and was reappointed to this board in 2020. He notes that while Mieres was from an upper middle-class Montevideo family, one that was also very Catholic, he had nothing near the wealth or the stature of Gallinal. Mieres may have been fully committed to the MEVIR cause, but he was less worldly, internationally connected, and innovative than Gallinal.¹²⁶ One important step Mieres took amidst the intensification of production was to replace MEVIR’s general manager Enrique Lessa with Andrés Pfeiff in December 1990. García Trovero summarizes that Lessa represented the slower, more artisanal

¹²¹ Cohen (2023), pp. 17-18.

¹²² In his speech at the inauguration of a new MEVIR plan in Casupá in 2024, Luis Lacalle Pou, reminisced about making obligatory stops at an *almacén* (store) in Casupá on trips he took as a youth to his family’s estancia outside of Cerro Colorado (field notes, 29 February 2024).

¹²³ Cohen (2023), p. 21.

¹²⁴ Interview with Rafael Sanguinetti, 2 June 2022.

¹²⁵ Interview with Alejandro Sandobal, 1 June 2022.

¹²⁶ Interview with Daniel García Trovero, 6 June 2022.

aspect of MEVIR's original spirit, and that Pfeiff's arrival was a way of streamlining management for the demands of an organization whose growth was now ordained.¹²⁷ Pfeiff, who came from the architecture faculty of the University of the Republic, reminisces that his academic colleagues dismissed MEVIR at that time as a way of providing labor for Gallinal's rancher buddies. MEVIR's image in the public conscience has improved considerably since then.¹²⁸

A major feature of MEVIR's expansion during the 1990s was the introduction of *Unidades Productivas* (Productive Units), or UPs. UPs represented a commitment not only toward building projects beyond housing, but also into dispersed (meaning homes that were not nucleated) housing interventions. The building of UPs also linked MEVIR more and more to other public institutions, such as the *Instituto Nacional de Colonización* (National Institute of Colonization), or INC, and the *Administración Nacional de Usinas y Transmisiones Eléctricas* (National Administration of Power Plants and Electrical Transmissions), or UTE, Uruguay's state electrical utility company.¹²⁹ As INC's name suggests, MEVIR became involved in building and rebuilding the agricultural infrastructure of many small and medium producers. Much of MEVIR's drive for UPs was concentrated in Uruguay's dairy belt or "cuenca lechera" in the southwest of Florida Department, the northwest of Canelones Department, and the eastern portions of San José Department. The reasons behind the UPs lie in their historical conjuncture. Around this time, the *Cooperativa Nacional de Productores de Leche* (National Cooperative of Dairy Producers), or Conaprole, which accounts for the majority of Uruguayan milk production,

¹²⁷ Interview with Daniel García Trovero, 21 June 2022.

¹²⁸ Pfeiff (2021). Ricardo Nopitsch, who was close with Lessa, points out that whether labor is exploited is a matter up to the owner, not to MEVIR. In any case, the application of labor laws has become stricter over time (interview, 10 June 2022).

¹²⁹ Pfeiff (2023).

modernized distribution and production. This had the consequence that many small producers (those with just a couple cows for example) could no longer sell their milk to Conaprole. For dairy farms whose future was now rendered tenuous, MEVIR's UPs helped them to become more viable. As Victoria Morena, a sociologist and MEVIR's director for the selection of participants, explains, the main components of MEVIR's activity in UPs includes replacing mud floors in milk yards with ones made from concrete, establishing connection to the electrical network, and building water wells and warehouses.¹³⁰ MEVIR made necessary improvements simultaneously to the homes of the small and medium producers, guided by the concept of "*vivienda productiva*" (housing linked to economic production).¹³¹

With Lacalle's drive to go from 5,000 to 10,000 homes, and the rise of the UPs came what Daniel García Trovero describes as a "crisis of growth".¹³² The early to mid-1990s is when MEVIR permanently ceased to be "*casero*" (homemade) and "*familiar*" (family-like), to invoke two words that frequently crop up in reminiscences by MEVIR employees. The appearance of a greater number of homes, as Rafael Sanguinetti notes, also brought about more visibility to MEVIR.¹³³ Mike Brennan, a Salto-based agronomist who worked for MEVIR from 1998 to 2015, contends that MEVIR reached a point of no return. It kept its "moral capital", while losing its "economic independence", as increasing financial demands went hand in hand with increasing construction.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Interview with Victoria Morena, 8 June 2022.

¹³¹ Interview with Daniel García Trovero, 6 June 2022. He stresses that dairy farming is much more labor intensive than ranching. Adolfo Garcé notes that the small-scale owner-producer sometimes lives in worse conditions than the rural wage laborer (2017, p. 14). Victoria Morena adds that "*pequeños productores*" (small producers) more often function as a family unit than like a company (interview, 8 June 2022).

¹³² Interview with Daniel García Trovero, 21 June 2022.

¹³³ Interview with Rafael Sanguinetti, 2 June 2022.

¹³⁴ Interview with Mike Brennan, 15 July 2022.

A unique event in MEVIR's history came as a result of its increased visibility, notoriety, and financial capacity. Propelled by Pfeiff and approved by an eager Mieres, MEVIR signed a multi-million-dollar contract with the European Union for a development project centered on the north of the country. Other than a shift to the application of non-asbestos fibre cement, the architectural scheme and concept remained the same.¹³⁵ Led by Nunzia Guardiani, an Italian consultant, the EU project functioned like a separate institution within the larger body. Hugo Javiel, a jack-of-all-trades within MEVIR's architecture and construction division and who has been with MEVIR since the early 1990s, recalls that Guardiani and her team learned a lot from MEVIR.¹³⁶ According to Daniel García Trovero, the "*tana*" (rioplatense slang for an Italian woman), brought a variety of changes, including the buying of their own trucks (something MEVIR had never previously done), the contracting of people specific to a project rather than hiring them as permanent employees, and the opening of offices in the interior.¹³⁷ The long-time MEVIR social worker Teresa Sangiovanni, now in a supervisory role, recalls the opening of several small offices in the interior at the time. These included a space given by the UdelaR in Tacuarembó, another ceded by the Intendencia of Salto, a rented apartment in Artigas, and most interestingly, an office in the outpost of Blanquillo, Durazno (pop. 1,084). Blanquillo became a focus site of the EU project, on account of deposits there of a special type of clay, one conducive to artisanal pottery. Whatever impact these offices had at the time, Sangiovanni, who is known by her colleagues as "Teté", and whose parents and older sisters migrated to Uruguay from Calabria in the 1950s, remembers that the last of these satellite workplaces closed in 2005.¹³⁸ Ares and Pini discouraged branch offices in their 1987 report, noting the value of Montevideo as

¹³⁵ Interview with Daniel García Trovero, 6 June 2022.

¹³⁶ Interview with Hugo Javiel, 8 June 2022.

¹³⁷ Interview with Daniel García Trovero, 6 June 2022.

¹³⁸ Interview with Teresa Sangiovanni, 4 May 2022.

a central meeting place.¹³⁹ Daniel García Trovero adds that decentralized offices are extremely expensive, arguing that MEVIR needs people from and working in the interior but it does not need an office there.¹⁴⁰ Opinion within MEVIR on the EU project is divided. Whatever the case, this initiative was an aberration and not something that had much of a long-term impact on the institution, other than the increasing the use of agronomists and the permanent establishment of a communications office. The lack of further investment in MEVIR from the EU and other international organizations comes in part because Uruguay is too developed to receive these kinds of funds with any regularity.¹⁴¹

The Death of Mieres and the Ascendency of the Frente Amplio

The death of Mieres in March 2003 marked a major inflection point in MEVIR's history. For the first time, the presidency of MEVIR became a political appointment rather than an internal decision with nominal approval from Uruguay's executive branch. When Mieres died, MEVIR's board unanimously approved as its president the rancher Fernando de Posadas. De Posadas, a *blanco* and a close collaborator of Alberto Volonté, the Uruguayan ambassador to Argentina at the time, had served as Mieres's vice president.¹⁴² However, Uruguay's executive branch, led by President Jorge Batlle, a Colorado, had other ideas. The de Posadas' presidency lasted less than a hundred days. The precipitating cause came from a permanent tension within MEVIR: the question of where to build. Stemming from a disagreement between its board and the executive branch about whether MEVIR should intervene in the resettlement of the "Barrio

¹³⁹ Ares and Pini (1987), p. 55.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Daniel García Trovero, 6 June 2022.

¹⁴¹ For a compelling journalistic account of extreme poverty in Uruguay's north, see Dominguez (2004). For some relevant historical context, the United States ceased to send Peace Corps volunteers to Uruguay starting in 1997. The volunteers it had sent before then (from 1963 to 1973, and from 1991 to 1997) came in very small numbers.

¹⁴² *El País* (Uruguay) (2003a) and (2003b).

Kennedy” slum in the coastal city of Maldonado, Batlle named the architect, Gonzalo Secco, a fellow Colorado, as the president on 1 July. The retired MEVIR social worker Magela Vicentino notes how the impact of the regional financial crises in 2001 and 2002 compounded the situation.¹⁴³ Upon his ousting, de Posadas said that “MEVIR has no place for politics and must continue its work without deviations”.¹⁴⁴

The newfound explicitly political nature of MEVIR’s leadership became of significant consequence two years later when the left-wing coalition *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front), or FA, took power for the first time. In 2005, MEVIR explicitly declared its mission as carrying out its activities as part of the development policies of the *quinquenio*.¹⁴⁵ The architect Francisco “Pancho” Beltrame, who had a background in housing cooperatives, became the new president. Beltrame served into the second term of FA rule until in 2012 he was appointed minister of housing. He was replaced by Ariel Díaz, a notary.¹⁴⁶ In the third FA term, the veterinarian Cecilia Blanco held MEVIR’s presidency. Given the ideological and organizational differences between the FA and Uruguay’s traditional parties, Daniel García Trovero likens the FA inheriting MEVIR to an eskimo being given a camel.¹⁴⁷

Despite this initial incongruity, MEVIR’s essence did not alter under fifteen years of Frente Amplio control, though many details about the organization’s operations did change. Some important shifts included the formation of a board comprised almost entirely of people affiliated with the FA (previous commissions had included both blancos and colorados, despite the fact that both Gallinal and Mieres were committed blancos), coming in large part from one of

¹⁴³ Interview with Magela Vicentino, 22 Jun 2022.

¹⁴⁴ *El País* (Uruguay) (2003b).

¹⁴⁵ Balarini (2017), p. 8.

¹⁴⁶ A retired MEVIR employee comments to me that Beltrame continued to run MEVIR behind the scenes giving directives to Díaz.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Daniel García Trovero, 7 November 2022.

the party's less moderate factions, the *Movimiento de Participación Popular* (Movement of Popular Participation), or MPP.¹⁴⁸ FA rule also brought closer links with the Uruguayan academy and the incorporation of academic thought into MEVIR's decision making.¹⁴⁹ A feature concomitant with the increasing valorization of academic knowledge was Beltrame's insistence on the elimination of local commissions, which he deemed as too closely linked to the National Party and not sufficiently technical.¹⁵⁰ The third FA regime, from 2015-2020, entered uncharted territory at odds with MEVIR's original principles, albeit briefly. In a small number of plans, MEVIR built two-story homes.¹⁵¹ It also allowed some families, such as within a plan in Juanicó, Canelones, to build and live in MEVIR homes without having to make any subsequent rent payments. This raised the question of whether MEVIR should be exclusively for workers, or whether it should also accept the most marginal people, including those without income from work.

As a political party inextricably intertwined with organized labor, the FA instituted important changes in MEVIR as a workplace. First, the number of office employees rose considerably compared to the number of field technicians (see Table 1). While Gallinal would likely have been happy with many other shifts in MEVIR that happened after his death, such as the expansion of the types of services the organization provides, this administrative bloat, along with a growing ratio of staff not directly working in the field, would likely have incensed a man who told his employees not to accept payment for travel allowances, since this meant fewer

¹⁴⁸ Ricardo Nopitsch notes that the FA kept one *blanco*, Gallinal's daughter Matilde, for cosmetic purposes of continuity (interview, 10 June 2022). Still, the overall point stands that the FA marked a clean break of institutional memory within the commission.

¹⁴⁹ Increasing links between MEVIR and the academy under the FA do not appear to have led, however, to the academy beyond Uruguay becoming more aware of MEVIR.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Ricardo Nopitsch, 10 June 2022. Daniel García Trovero comments that the deeper into rural Uruguay you get, the stronger the National Party is, and historically MEVIR "*engancha con esto*" (has latched onto this) (interview, 15 February 2022).

¹⁵¹ Abbadie et al (2020), p. 111.

bricks for families who needed homes.¹⁵² The other noteworthy labor shift under the FA was the introduction of unions both into the MEVIR office and to its construction sites. Gabriel Moreno, MEVIR’s current director of human resources, says that Beltrame wanted a union as the sole interlocutor of any proposals from workers. Unionization has meant construction is not allowed to happen on Saturdays. This development has made it hard for some of the families to participate in the program. These effects of unionization, including a new mandatory retirement age of 60, has also presented a series of new challenges to MEVIR’s construction foremen.¹⁵³ Beltrame also saw to it that his position would be remunerated, one holding the official title of the National Director of Rural Housing within the MVOTMA. More accustomed to the public sector and working alongside unions than his predecessors, Beltrame also instituted a more vertical management structure. In this new structure, “Directors” of a division became “Managers”.¹⁵⁴ One retired MEVIR architect laments the clear loss of a space and oxygen for interchange.

Table 1: Field technicians as a proportion of all non-construction worker employees (derived from Garcé 2017, p. 14)

Year	Total of non-construction worker employees	Of which, this number work as field technicians
1984	32	4 social workers, 6 architects
1990	69	17 social workers, 16 architects
2000	Almost 100	N/A
2017 ¹⁵⁵	157	20 social workers, 16 architects

¹⁵² Noting that social work is not meant to be an office profession, one MEVIR employee questioned to me why there are eighteen social workers based in the office now, compared with two or three when the FA took over.

¹⁵³ Interview with Gabriel Moreno, 9 June 2022.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Adolfo García da Rosa, 15 December 2022.

¹⁵⁵ Garcé states that MEVIR in 2017 had a total of 571 employees, including construction workers (2017, p. 14).

A notable disruption to MEVIR's operation on the ground was the passing of the 2008 *Ley de Ordenamiento Territorial y Desarrollo Sostenible* (Urban Planning and Sustainable Development Law). This significantly impacted the lands on which MEVIR could build, as rezoning became a more expensive and lengthy process. Despite being grounded in a "new rurality" (see later in this chapter), something that contests the bounds between the urban and the rural, the law prohibited urbanizing processes (the chief example of which are nuclei of MEVIR homes) on rural land.¹⁵⁶ Sienna, MEVIR's planning director, points out that what is urban or rural is not merely a quantitative or qualitative matter. It is also a legal one.¹⁵⁷ She explains to me that the core idea of "urban" land is that is where infrastructure is located.¹⁵⁸ The 2008 law was about giving the state more juridical presence in territorial matters.¹⁵⁹ Bringing a more national outlook to land use planning, it updated the 1946 *Ley de Centros Poblados* (Law of Populated Centers). This law had given the departments an exclusive competency to approve subdivisions of any new developments.¹⁶⁰ The consequence was that the subdividing of land with an area of less than five hectares (and in Montevideo and Canelones less than three hectares) had to be considered urban.¹⁶¹

These laws are important. They speak to the geographical question of where MEVIR works. Beltrame saw the 2008 law as a direct attack on where MEVIR could build.¹⁶² At least thirty percent of small localities continue to be considered rural by the *Dirección Nacional de*

¹⁵⁶ Sienna Gelber (2020), p. 10 and p. 34. See especially articles 31 and 39 of the law.

¹⁵⁷ Sienna Gelber (2020), p. 12.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Cristina Sienna, 22 March 2022.

¹⁵⁹ Sienna Gelber (2020), p. 4.

¹⁶⁰ Sienna Gelber (2020), p. 11.

¹⁶¹ Sienna Gelber (2020), p. 29.

¹⁶² Interview with Cristina Sienna, 22 March 2022.

Catastro (National Land Registry Office), or DNC.¹⁶³ Sienna laments that the DNC is slow to update its registry and is prone to problems with payment. This makes MEVIR's long-term planning more difficult, compounded by the fact that people's needs in small rural localities are more urgent than the average.¹⁶⁴ A set of laws were written to modify the 2008 law to allow for exceptions, such as Law 18.834 of 2011, which permits intendencias to categorize real estate acquired by MEVIR before the 2008 Law as either urban or suburban.¹⁶⁵ In 2022, MEVIR made an agreement with the DNC that overcomes the legal obstacles encountered when trying to establish deeds for homes on lots that are not subdivided.¹⁶⁶ Despite these increasing mechanisms to work around the 2008 law, the material consequences of the law have fallen on MEVIR. As a result, MEVIR has needed to interact with organisms it had not previously done, and more and more plans have become both smaller in size and part of the preexisting urban fabric.¹⁶⁷ From an urbanism point of view, this last development, keeping MEVIR homes closer to other homes and services, is a positive one.¹⁶⁸

Early in the third five-year term of FA control, MEVIR made a noteworthy change in how it intervened in territory. Driven by its increasing use of academic knowledge, and

¹⁶³ Outside of Montevideo, ninety percent of the Uruguayan population living on lands classified as urban lives in towns containing more than 5,000 people. The remaining ten percent live between 500 localities of less than 5,000 people (Sienna Gelber 2020, p. 7). One hundred of these 500 localities are not directly related to rural production. They are instead, namely *balnearios* (beachfront towns). The remaining four hundred "*pequeñas localidades*" (small localities), which could be considered qualitatively rural, have 247,543 people, or 7.5 percent of the nation's population. These are the places where MEVIR works. A half of these four hundred small localities have fewer than 200 inhabitants. 77 of these small localities have fewer than 55 inhabitants (Sienna Gelber 2020, p. 18). A half of the towns founded after the 1946 law are comprised of purely MEVIR homes. The other half were usually established for specific ends. Examples would include Palmar and its hydroelectric project and Villa Serrana developed for tourism (Sienna Gelber 2020, p. 31). In 1998, Álvaro López Gallero calculated MEVIR was more than half of the housing stock in 36 localities, and that in 8 localities, it was the entirety of the housing stock (López Gallero 1998, p. 10.)

¹⁶⁴ Sienna Gelber (2020), pp. 40-41.

¹⁶⁵ Sienna Gelber (2020), p. 17 and interview with Cristina Sienna, 22 March 2022. She describes suburban-zoned lands as "urban lite".

¹⁶⁶ Interview with Cristina Sienna, 22 March 2022.

¹⁶⁷ Interview with Cristina Sienna, 22 March 2022 and interview with Hugo Javiel, 8 June 2022.

¹⁶⁸ See Sienna's discussion of the town of Sarandí de Navarro. Sienna Gelber (2020), p. 32

spearheaded by board member Gonzalo Balarini, an architect, MEVIR instituted *Planes Integrales de Proyectos Locales* (Comprehensive Local Project Plans), known by the convenient acronym PIPL. Multiple modalities of MEVIR interventions fall under the umbrella of any given PIPL. These include nuclei of homes on MEVIR-owned lands for families without their own land (which means following the organization's customary pattern). Another modality involves interventions in existing built-up areas. MEVIR refers to this as "*Planta Urbana*" (meaning urban area, or urban street plan). This serves families with their own land, and includes new homes, repairs, and connections of dwellings to sanitation. A third modality comprises interventions in dispersed rural areas. This "*Area Rural*" model was also designed for families with their own lands, and besides new homes, repairs, and utilities, it can also address families' needs for new infrastructure helping their agricultural production. *Planta urbana* and *area rural*, modalities for which families do not participate in the mutual aid building of a nucleus, still require that families contribute hours of construction as a form of self-building, one guided by MEVIR's technical team and professional construction workers.¹⁶⁹

As Teresa Sangiovanni summarizes to me at the historic La Coruñesa café near the MEVIR office in Central Montevideo, a PIPL plan is not one limited to a single locality. It will often include two or more adjacent localities within a MEVIR-defined microregion. An example of this is a recent plan under the same technical team that had two nuclei in Santa Clara de Olimar, a single nucleus in Arévalo, and *planta urbana* and *area rural* interventions in both

¹⁶⁹ Balarini (2017), p. 9.

localities.¹⁷⁰ Sangiovanni also highlights the importance of repairs. Before the advent of the PIPL, it was a new house or house at all.¹⁷¹

The PIPL and the 2008 Urban Planning Law spurred MEVIR to intensify efforts to access lands viable for construction. Balarini notes how the PIPL helped to start a “*sistema de llamado*” (open call system), designed to attract those parties who were interested in selling their lands to MEVIR. In the first couple years of the PIPL, this allowed MEVIR to accumulate land in such towns as Tambores, Curtina, Ansina, 25 de Agosto, and Lascano. In this last, MEVIR acquired a large amount of land that was both zoned urban and contained preexisting infrastructure. Balarini points to the case of Vichadero in Rivera Department in order to illustrate the heterogeneous sources of MEVIR’s land acquisition. In this particular case, the Intendencia of Rivera donated land. The *Administración de los Servicios de Salud del Estado* (State Health Services Administration), or ASSE, and the *Ministerio de Salud Pública* (Ministry of Public Health), or MSP, gave land as a counterparty for work done by MEVIR. The *Ministerio de Defensa Nacional* (Ministry of National Defense), or MDN, gave land in exchange for homes, and the BROU sold land to MEVIR. Of all these lands in Vichadero, only the portion given by the intendencia did not have infrastructure already.¹⁷²

The PIPL model results from both from abstract convictions and from a data-driven approach. Victoria Morena emphasizes that some criticisms of the limitations of the nucleus model came from participants themselves.¹⁷³ Balarini acknowledges that the PIPL came out of a

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Teresa Sangiovanni, 20 June 2022. Giving a sense of the geography of this depopulated part of Uruguay beyond Cerro Chato on Ruta 7, Santa Clara and Arévalo are separated by some 45km, and this is mostly along a dirt road, one with no other intervening towns.

¹⁷¹ Both Ricardo Nopitsch and Magela Vicentino recall the occasional efforts at repairs in the 1980s, which were curtailed on account of their being time consuming and of a lower priority than new construction.

¹⁷² Balarini (2017), p. 13.

¹⁷³ Interview with Victoria Morena, 8 June 2022. Morena, who is from Canelones’s eponymous departmental capital and whose maternal grandfather produced wine nearby, elaborates that some people’s needs are housing-related, while others are production-related, and many are intertwined.

2011 MEVIR strategic planning meeting. This concluded that even if housing improves quality of life, it does not on its own take people out of poverty. The PIPL is also an excellent example of MEVIR responding to data, in this case the findings from the 2011 census that the housing deficit in MEVIR's target areas is more quantitative than qualitative. What this means is that rather than housing need being mostly a matter of families who need homes, it is actually a matter of families who need better homes.¹⁷⁴

Balarini notes the five axes on which the PIPL is structured: 1) the planned growth of populated places, 2) social inclusion, 3) interinstitutional coordination, 4) participation and empowerment, and 5) environmental and construction innovation.¹⁷⁵ The second axis is worth discussing further. Under the PIPL, MEVIR tilted its selection processes to favor families showing more severe vulnerability, increasing emphasis on variables such as lower incomes, larger family sizes, health problems, the presence of single heads of household, and people living in more precarious dwellings. One example of this shift in approach was an agreement with the *Ministerio de Desarrollo Social* (Ministry of Social Development), or MIDES, which allowed families in a MIDES program to move into a vacated MEVIR home.¹⁷⁶ Such families have few to no economic resources and little capacity to do mutual aid hours. They thus would not qualify to be selected for a MEVIR plan under normal guidelines. MEVIR made a similar agreement with the *Banco de Previsión Social* (Social Insurance Bank), or BPS, the state entity in charge of

¹⁷⁴ According to Balarini, the 2011 census showed that the qualitative deficit accounted for 79 percent of the total, compared to the 21 percent that was quantitative (2017, p. 19). The qualitative deficit refers to the number of homes that should be repaired. This includes such cases as the need to build extensions or the lack of basic services. The quantitative deficit refers to the number of homes that should be built on account of the existence of irreparable homes, the presence of more than one household per home, and of families who are occupying without permission.

¹⁷⁵ Balarini (2017), p. 12. Balarini is the listed author of the document but acknowledges that MEVIR selection team members Yanina Aniotz and Yamila Meseguez were responsible for the section titled "Los fundamentos de los PIPL".

¹⁷⁶ MIDES, established in 2005, is a creation of the Frente Amplio. The coalition government that came to power in 2020 did not eliminate this ministry, despite some observers having expected otherwise.

social security, for pensioners on reduced incomes. Another example signaling social inclusion was the aforementioned selection of some families whose rent payments would be entirely subsidized (though Balarini stresses that these families would still be required to complete the same number of mutual aid hours as other participants, these hours representing 24 percent of the total cost of a home).¹⁷⁷ As Balarini notes, prioritizing the most vulnerable rural families is a change with respect to the “typical” target population of MEVIR. The usual demographic has comprised wage-earning families, ones with sufficient income to make payments and availability to do mutual aid.¹⁷⁸

The third axis of interinstitutional cooperation, which was not new to the PIPL, but was at least made more explicit, is relevant for thinking about MEVIR in the big picture and in comparison with other countries. Balarini highlights that rural housing policy is a social policy defined by and coordinated with other public policies at all stages of the process.¹⁷⁹

The PIPL’s main instrument of innovation is arguably the flexibility it gives to potential participants. For example, families building one-off *planta urbana* or *area rural* homes complete construction in around sixty days.¹⁸⁰ While those sixty days are especially intense, for many families this is a far more viable option than the sacrifices that come with a commitment for more than a year-plus when building a nucleus. *Planta urbana* and *area rural* also allows for choice at which point during the plan a given family builds their home. Beyond the question of

¹⁷⁷ Balarini (2017), p. 14-15.

¹⁷⁸ Balarini (2017), p. 16. In addition to the question of time commitment, there is also the matter of willingness. The general ideological critique of this policy that I have heard is that one should have to work for what they get. Moreover, I have heard a critique from MEVIR social workers. When some participants do not have to pay back rent subsidies, that generates jealousy between participants complicating teamwork.

¹⁷⁹ Balarini (2017), p. 18. A critique of institutional cooperation is that it furthers MEVIR as a statist project rather than an autonomous self-sustaining entity and implies a belief that the state has a monopoly on providing social good. Despite MEVIR’s many partnerships with private companies in the purchasing and supplies stage, MEVIR makes little public fanfare championing its connections to the private sector, let alone recognition of opportunities for the private sector to enter into the field of rural housing provision.

¹⁸⁰ Balarini (2017), p. 18.

time commitment, there is also the matter that a one-off home is more suitable to many families' longer-term needs than a home in a nucleus.¹⁸¹ As such, MEVIR becomes attractive to a wider swath of the rural population. That residency requirements are based on the MEVIR-defined micro-region rather than tied to a specific locality within that region, allows for more aspirant families and it lessens pressure on building nuclei as a solution.¹⁸²

Cristina Sienna remarks how the explosion of *planta urbana* and *area rural* has generated a huge change in how MEVIR works.¹⁸³ However, the fact that many MEVIR technicians have been well-versed in the *Unidades Productivas* made the transition to the PIPL smoother. Morena, the selection director, notes that by this time the UPs had passed their peak.¹⁸⁴ Brennan, the agronomist, who retired in 2015, says that the work MEVIR set out to accomplish with the UPs had largely been completed by then.¹⁸⁵ Ultimately the PIPL decenters nuclei as the main recognizable feature of MEVIR, an institution that increasingly takes on multiple forms in the landscape.¹⁸⁶

A Return to Blanco Leadership

The 2019 elections brought an end to fifteen years of Frente Amplio control and the assumption of a center-to-right coalition government made up of the National Party, the Colorado Party, and a new party called the *Cabildo Abierto*. The blanco Juan Pablo Delgado, an

¹⁸¹ Interview with Teresa Sangiovanni, 20 June 2022.

¹⁸² Balarini (2017), p. 19. As I will discuss later, the micro-region concept has its critics, not least among participants themselves.

¹⁸³ Interview with Cristina Sienna, 22 March 2022.

¹⁸⁴ Interview with Victoria Morena, 8 June 2022.

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Mike Brennan, 15 July 2022.

¹⁸⁶ According to Balarini, by 2016 some 82 percent of the 28,265 families served by MEVIR lived in nuclei and 18 percent were in dispersed interventions (which also include non-housing interventions like rural electrification, an initiative especially strong in Tacuarembó). In 2017, he adds, following the PIPL modifications 70 percent of MEVIR service was provided in nuclei. The rest came in dispersed areas. The estimate for 2018 was 41 percent in nuclei, 42 percent in *planta urbana*, and 17 percent in *area rural* (Balarini 2017, p. 19).

architect who worked from 2003 to 2020 in the Intendencia of Canelones, became MEVIR's president, and the board was conformed of four blancos, three colorados, and three *cabildantes*.

Despite its genesis having come from a rival party and having been rooted in a contrasting ideological vision of social and economic relations in the countryside, MEVIR not only survived fifteen years of FA rule, but it carried on as usual in terms of the overarching goals it set and achieved. As Luis Lacalle Pou, the current President of the Republic, tells the journalist Pablo Cohen, the Frente Amplio, despite revealing a mindset on housing that focused on cooperatives, did not stop MEVIR's momentum. Lacalle Pou stresses that MEVIR has a rare capacity to "*mutar sin perder su esencia*" (mutate without losing its essence).¹⁸⁷

The return to a center and center-right government has maintained this essence with its own flavor of mutations. Though the PIPL system continues apace, MEVIR has eliminated any hundred percent subsidies of rent payments. A major priority of the current regime is reducing the cost of homes. According to Nicolás Silva Boniatti, a close political collaborator of Delgado, these had increased thirty percent in real terms over the last five years.¹⁸⁸ Besides stricter controls in the budget and finances, one example of cost reductions in the current MEVIR regime is a shift in its selection process, where an increasing number of eligible participants are chosen by a lottery rather than through a points system (although participants selected by lottery still need to be confirmed through a vetting process with a MEVIR social worker).¹⁸⁹ The current MEVIR board member Edith Richard, a retired medical doctor, highlights that another example of cost cutting is MEVIR's use of different construction systems, namely of wood and of cellular

¹⁸⁷ Cohen (2022), p. 148.

¹⁸⁸ Silva Boniatti (2021).

¹⁸⁹ The current regime's budget cuts have not included layoffs. This is likely due to the high internal political costs within the organization, and in order to maintain the morale of employees, many of whom were hired by the FA regime. For a more detailed discussion of recent changes in the selection process, see Chapter Three.

concrete. While not cheaper in their own right, these new methods lower the number of months that building takes.¹⁹⁰ Richard also points to MEVIR’s increasing use of “*convenios*”, or interinstitutional agreements, for strategic purposes. While such cooperation was already a priority of MEVIR, the current regime reached a record quantity of *convenios* in 2023. *Convenios*, as Richard points out, provide more tools to acquire value through in-kind contributions, especially in order to acquire sought-after lands that are currently owned by public entities.¹⁹¹



Figure 8: The wood homes, on the left, under construction in Las Flores, Rivera Department, represent a shift from MEVIR’s traditional use of brick, seen in the homes on the right, which were built in the late 1990s (photo by author, 19 January 2024).

Post-construction follow-up with participants, a theme that Ares and Pini insisted upon in their 1987 report, is another concern of the current administration. Attention to “post-obra” is

¹⁹⁰ Interview with Edith Richard, 14 December 2023. MEVIR social workers have voiced concerns that a shorter construction process limits the possibilities of what group work through mutual aid can achieve. The long-term social and material outcomes of using non-brick materials is something MEVIR will do well to monitor.

¹⁹¹ Richard points to the *Administración Nacional de Educación Pública* (National Administration of Public Education), or ANEP, as a major landowner, and a public body with which MEVIR has pursued important agreements. A publicly visible example of one of these *convenios* appears at the end of Chapter Five.

taking place in two forms. First, MEVIR has allowed residents to make their rent payments digitally through an app, concurrent with other digital ways of interfacing with the organization.¹⁹² Second, MEVIR has renewed an emphasis on deed signing. It has done this under the belief that residents paying back their share of the subsidy is also a form of mutual aid, increasing thereby the chances that people in similar situations in other parts of the country can build and live in a MEVIR home.¹⁹³

Recalling the eternal challenge in MEVIR of where to build, the change of greatest public and political visibility during the current administration was an article in the *Ley de Urgente Consideración* (Urgent Consideration Law), or LUC, approved by Uruguay's legislative branch in 2020. This allowed MEVIR to build now in towns of up to 15,000 people, albeit using different funding mechanisms than for towns with 5,000 people or less.¹⁹⁴ As Juan Pablo Delgado explains to Pablo Cohen, a priority of his regime is not just to build homes, but to intervene in a larger number and wider variety of localities.¹⁹⁵ As Cristina Sienna explains, before the LUC, the limits of MEVIR's building were not legally bound to population numbers, but to whether the land was urban or rural.¹⁹⁶ While MEVIR has always focused on a specific geography, there have been exceptions where plans in larger towns, of which Young and Río Branco serve as examples, have been built. In 1998, Álvaro López Gallero, the UdelaR

¹⁹² Interview with Edith Richard, 14 December 2023.

¹⁹³ One current commission member critiques the previous regime by stressing to me that they ignored deed signing as a way of letting poor people avoid paying their share. Conversely, a criticism of the current regime's increased emphasis on deed signing as a public event is that it is just another excuse for political grandstanding.

¹⁹⁴ The irony of the LUC articles is that a center-right government is pushing to build in areas that are less associated with rural wage labor and thus relatively less populated with their constituents. This involves the calculation of important political tradeoffs. Hugo Javiel, who was one of the MEVIR employees tasked with collaborating with legislators to draft the articles notes that they drafted versions with an upper limit of 10,000, 15,000, and 20,000. The 15,000 version was ultimately approved (interview, 8 June 2022).

¹⁹⁵ Cohen (2022), p. 68. Ricardo Nopitsch suggests to me that a clearer barometer of MEVIR doing its job is not the number of interventions (or the number of localities with interventions), but the number of homes built per employee (interview, 10 June 2022).

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Cristina Sienna, 22 March 2022.

geographer, criticized MEVIR for building in larger towns, citing Young, Tranqueras, and Río Branco in his critique. But he noted one reason why MEVIR was building in these larger places is that they often lacked municipal housing plans or other MVOTMA interventions.¹⁹⁷

A THEMATIC HISTORY

The previous section summarizes the events and actors that have driven MEVIR's history. Building on this chronological sketch, this thematically-organized section will now highlight how MEVIR's pattern of change within continuity is apparent in different aspects of the organization's operations: the office workplace; building sites; the design of the buildings and plans and how they interface with their surroundings; the increasing role of politics within MEVIR and the institution's closer integration with the state; methods of financing; research of localities and selection of participants; and the types of interventions offered and the target population.

An Office Workplace

MEVIR as a workplace has adapted its office space and its office culture to accommodate its growth. Magela Vicentino gives an account of MEVIR's early years. Beginning at MEVIR in December 1970, Vicentino was the first social worker to become a permanent employee of the organization. She recalls that during her interview, Gallinal said in no uncertain terms that "here, politics and religion are not allowed", and that she was given the job because she had first-hand knowledge of the countryside, having grown up in Treinta y Tres. At the time, the office was shared with Agromax, Gallinal's venture to import phosphates to fertilize Uruguay's grasslands.

¹⁹⁷ López Gallero (1998), p. 10.

The office consisted of three architects, Francisco Russo, Ariel Cabrera, and Capdebon (first name unconfirmed), two administrative staff borrowed from the Ministry of Labor, and three social workers, two borrowed from the Ministry of Labor, and another from RAUSA (a sugar beet manufacturer). All worked in close proximity in a single room.¹⁹⁸ When Alejandro Sandobal was hired in 1981, there were still only a dozen or so workers, and they all worked in apartment 202, where Hugo Javiel and his team are currently based.¹⁹⁹

Despite bearing the same street address (1321 Paraguay), the MEVIR office today is a different world. There are two entrances. To the left, the official entrance, one bearing the MEVIR insignia, leads to a grand old house. On the ground floor, two receptionists sit behind a series of MEVIR themed displays, such as paintings and pottery by participants about their homes and the rural landscape. Beyond the receptionists is a wrought-iron staircase next to a stained-glass window. This leads to the first floor where the executive offices are housed. The president's office is tucked away in a corner past the desks of the president's two executive secretaries (permanent positions, not ones defined by political appointments), and the president's political secretary (a political appointment). Adjacent to the president's office is one of MEVIR's two meeting rooms, and the one traditionally used for board meetings, the Sala Gallinal. The wall of this last room is dominated by a five-foot tall map of Uruguay, one with pins indicating each locality where MEVIR has intervened. Also on this floor of the old house is the office of MEVIR's general manager and the general manager's secretary. One floor up lies the offices of the selection and planning teams, and a larger meeting room, the Sala Mieres, which is typically used for planning meetings.

¹⁹⁸ Interview with Magela Vicentino, 22 June 2022.

¹⁹⁹ Interview with Alejandro Sandobal, 1 June 2022.



Figure 9: A portrait of Alberto Gallinal, alongside portraits of MEVIR's subsequent presidents, sits outside the meeting hall in the organization's office that bears its founder's name (photo by author, 16 April 2024).

The vast majority of MEVIR employees work in an unassuming modernist apartment building called “Edificio Paraguay” adjacent to the old house. Most of the apartments are occupied by MEVIR, although other enterprises are installed there as well, including, ironically the tourism company that manages San Pedro de Timote.

The physical ambience of MEVIR is a far cry from the spacious environment of, say, a contemporary tech-firm. MEVIR is an attractive employer due to its institutional prestige, six-hour workdays, high salaries relative to what Uruguayans with similar qualifications would earn elsewhere, and five weeks of annual vacation: two weeks at the beginning of January, a week at Easter, and two additional weeks to be taken at a time of the employee’s choosing, with more days added for seniority.²⁰⁰ However, if prospective employees are drawn to MEVIR, it is probably not due to the office space itself, though the lucky few in human resources with the seventh floor balcony may beg to differ. There are few design and material perks meant to woo potential workers. Instead, the ambience is rather perfunctory and any added aesthetic is centered on pictures of MEVIR homes, events, and participants, and maps of MEVIR’s interventions. A frequent sighting in the office is a timeline chart of MEVIR’s active and imminent building projects. This chart is much longer than it would have been several decades ago. As Alejandro Sandobal points out, in the early 1980s, it was a big deal to have six towns with MEVIR construction happening at a given time.²⁰¹ Today, MEVIR is always involved at some stage of an intervention in at least a few dozen localities at once. Thus, MEVIR is not just building more in the absolute sense, but it is also covering more ground, and that requires more attention to detail in the office. This is an important point to highlight in MEVIR’s overall impact. MEVIR does

²⁰⁰ The six-hour workday may be appealing, though not necessarily to early birds, as it needs to be completed between 7:30 and 2:30, at which point the office closes.

²⁰¹ Interview with Alejandro Sandobal, 1 June 2022.

not just leave a legacy in places around the country, but it maintains an active presence. It rarely goes more than a couple decades without coming to a town and it often intervenes with greater frequency.

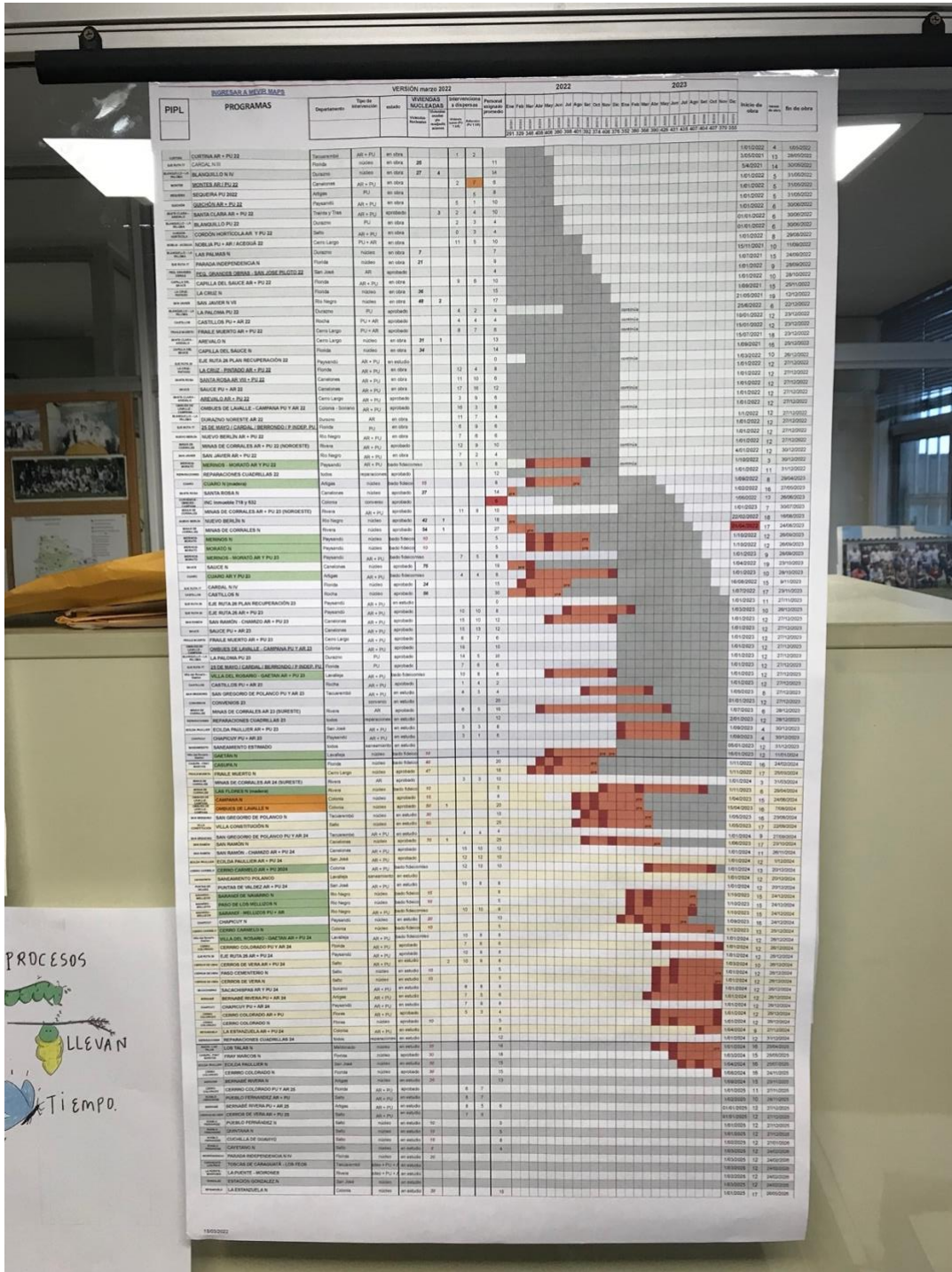


Figure 10: The *planilla de obras*, a chart of planned and active construction works, is a frequent sight at the MEVIR office (photo by author, 4 May 2022).

Nevertheless, as Daniel García Trovero ventures, Gallinal would be horrified at the relative lack of austerity of MEVIR today.²⁰² More to the point, beyond the sheer size, the main distinction between then and now is the degree to which the office has compartmentalized. Apart from those people in leadership roles and those with specific emissarial tasks, daily contact with people in other sectors is not common. Hugo Javiel, who expresses significant gratitude to his mentors when he entered MEVIR in the early 1990s, comments that it is harder to transmit the legacy of Gallinal's vision and way of working when people's work is more individualized, specialized, and compartmentalized.²⁰³ Similarly, Sandobal notes how over time there is less and less closeness between rank-and-file MEVIR employees and the board of directors.²⁰⁴ Also a factor lost in the sea of compartmentalization is a space for visionary thinking, which is not tied to the day-to-day or to the skillset of one particular sector. In theory, and in MEVIR's early days, the board provided this space, although Ares and Pini insisted as early as 1987 on the need to fill this gap. However, as Gabriel Moreno, the human resources director, notes, it is hard to ask for the board's time for serious problems when they only have the time to deal with any specific problems that come up ("*cosas puntuales*").²⁰⁵ Moreover, the board's commitment to carrying out the policies of a five-year regime, knowing full well that the subsequent five-year regime could erase or change any of their work, also disincentivizes problematizing MEVIR in the bigger picture. Delgado himself adds that the board has become more professionalized and one with an increased time commitment since Gallinal's day.²⁰⁶

²⁰² Interview with Daniel García Trovero, 15 February 2022.

²⁰³ Interview with Hugo Javiel, 8 June 2022.

²⁰⁴ Interview with Alejandro Sandobal, 1 June 2022.

²⁰⁵ Interview with Gabriel Moreno, 9 June 2022.

²⁰⁶ Cohen (2022), p. 66. Former MEVIR employees have questioned aloud to me whether the board remains truly honorary, even though none of the board members receive salaries. Besides the fact that board members receive travel allowances, there is political gain to be had, with certain members using their status as a steppingstone towards more powerful positions rather than for the social end itself.

Related to the realities of growth and compartmentalization are the ways employees socialize beyond the routine tasks of getting things done. Sandobal reminisces about how during the Gallinal and Mieres years, inaugurations of homes used to be more of a party. He laments how with MEVIR's growth and with employees more immersed in their own worlds, it is harder to be "*fiestero*" and "*compañero*", though he does his best to maintain a collective festive attitude within his own sector. Next to the Peñarol flag in his office, he shows me a picture of eleven MEVIR employees who formed a soccer team to play against a team in the town where an inauguration took place, noting that soccer games were a common part of the festivities surrounding inaugurations.²⁰⁷ For inaugurations, Sandobal tells me, the board would rent a bus and travel together with office employees. They would usually stay the evening and celebrate with participants and other town-dwellers over an *asado*. Ana María Henderson, a local commission member for plans inaugurated in 1985 and 1993 in Cuchilla de Guaviyú, a very remote spot in Salto consisting almost entirely of MEVIR homes, recalls receiving eight cows donated from local estancieros to eat at an inauguration.²⁰⁸ Rosario Bisio, a retired Salto-based social worker who did that plan concurs that MEVIR fiestas today "*no tienen nada que ver*" (have nothing to do [with what they used to be]).²⁰⁹ The fact that inaugurations used to take place on Saturdays, something that ceased to happen once the board and president of MEVIR became explicitly political appointments, helps to explain this. While it does not lie within his job duties, Sandobal does his part to keep the festive spirit alive in MEVIR. He organizes MEVIR's end of year party, making sure it falls on the first two Fridays of December, a time before employees

²⁰⁷ Club Atlético Peñarol and Club Nacional de Football are far and away Uruguay's two most successful and most supported soccer clubs.

²⁰⁸ Interview with Ana María Henderson, 12 November 2022.

²⁰⁹ Interview with Rosario Bisio, 12 November 2022.

trickle away for an early summer vacation or to spend long weekends at Uruguay's many beaches.²¹⁰

MEVIR maintains a strong sense of team spirit nonetheless and its employees still come to inaugurations of homes, just not as often. MEVIR sometimes rents buses to take staff to inaugurations. However, these buses return to Montevideo soon after, so the staff do not stay for the town inauguration *fiestas*.²¹¹ One of MEVIR's hallmarks as a workplace is the longevity of its staff and lack of labor turnover. This is not simply due to inertia, or low labor mobility in Uruguay. It is a part of MEVIR's essence, as Gabriel Moreno claims, for people to stay. MEVIR values longevity.²¹² The social worker Elena Romero, based in her hometown of Dolores, Soriano Department, remarks that MEVIR is unique in that people see themselves working there for their whole life, and that for social workers, it is probably the highest paying and most stable job there is in Uruguay.²¹³ Longevity and growth of hiring are characteristics of MEVIR human resources, but so too is the reluctance to lay off workers. Gabriel Moreno notes that even though MEVIR manages public funds, its employees are not public employees, and they are not thus immovable. However, he explains that MEVIR management is not as lean as in the private sector. Mike Brennan, the agronomist, remembers of only two MEVIR employees being fired during his seventeen years and that one of them was dismissed for a rather egregious transgression. When, he asks, does this happen over a similar span of time in a truly private company?²¹⁴

²¹⁰ Interview with Alejandro Sandobal, 1 June 2022.

²¹¹ Some employees have commented to me how the current administration is more encouraging than the previous one of letting employees take a day out of office work in order to attend inaugurations. While inaugurations are an emotional occasion, encouraging rank and file employees to visit on a normal day on the construction site may instead be a more effective way of immersing employees into MEVIR's values and methods.

²¹² Interview with Gabriel Moreno, 9 June 2022.

²¹³ Interview with Elena Romero, 6 September 2022.

²¹⁴ Interview with Mike Brennan, 15 July 2022.

The phrase “*poner la camiseta*” comes up often in discussions about working at MEVIR. Ricardo Nopitsch talks about how Gallinal “*se manejaba con valores*”, or how he ran MEVIR with values.²¹⁵ Gallinal used tangible examples for the employees in the office to make sure they knew they were part of a larger social mission. Nopitsch recalls how he would say, “each paper is a face that needs a home”.²¹⁶ Vicentino highlights the importance of Nopitsch’s role in transmitting this sentiment to future generations of MEVIR architects.²¹⁷ Despite working in one of the most technical divisions of the institution, a space full of cadastral maps and site plans, and being MEVIR’s first employee to draw with AutoCAD, Javiel remarks how MEVIR is not just a technical institution, but also a feeling (“*MEVIR es un sentimiento*”).²¹⁸ Teresa Sangiovanni, who has worked both as a field technician and as a supervisor of field technicians from the office, beams that there is a pride at belonging here, and that MEVIR is not a place where you do the bare minimum and leave.²¹⁹ Adolfo García da Rosa is a retired MEVIR architect who also has significant experience working with public sector institutions in Salto, where he lived during most of his working life. He observes from his position as a field architect that MEVIR office workers have a high level of commitment, which is very uplifting. Knowing the change to which you are contributing to is the mystique of MEVIR, he claims.²²⁰

Invoking another soccer phrase, “*cuadro que gana no se toca*” (you don’t bench a winning team), the architect Federico Becerra, on our trips to and from Capilla del Sauce, laid out a typology of three generations of MEVIR employees. Daniel García Trovero has a similar vision, seeing MEVIR’s growth as a series of layers.²²¹ The first group is the foundational

²¹⁵ Interview with Ricardo Nopitsch, 10 June 2022.

²¹⁶ Interview with Ricardo Nopitsch, 10 June 2022.

²¹⁷ Interview with Magela Vicentino, 22 June 2022.

²¹⁸ Interview with Hugo Javiel, 8 June 2022.

²¹⁹ Interview with Teresa Sangiovanni, 20 June 2022.

²²⁰ Interview with Adolfo García da Rosa, 15 December 2022.

²²¹ Interview with Daniel García Trovero, 7 November 2022.

MEVIR of people directly involved with Gallinal, in which the weight of his rancher friends and colleagues was a starting point. In this generation of orthodoxy, much was done more informally. The second layer comes with Mieres, and a group of people who showed themselves less fundamentalist to the original cause, but who were nonetheless committed both to the general idea, and to growing it, making it a more massive phenomenon. This growth mentality generated resistance from the first group (although not from Gallinal) and it prompted the firing of Enrique Lessa as general manager. The third group comes with the FA and an ideological and partisan paradigm shift. But more importantly, this also brought a shift towards a process of academic understanding, one designed to complement more informal local knowledges and networks. An explosion of skilled workers who no longer necessarily work in the field has come with this.

Construction Sites

MEVIR's building sites (and how its technicians relate to these) have adapted to new technologies and demands. As Adolfo Garcé summarizes, the history of MEVIR's construction has been characterized by tradeoffs between quality and quantity, homogeneity and adaptation, and simplicity and speed.²²² Another story from Magela Vicentino is a case in point. Vicentino prefaces by recalling how Gallinal would signal his desired financial austerity by saying "we are working for the people that are the most silent". She explains how in Gallinal's day, if a MEVIR technician went somewhere by car, it was because that was the only way to get there. While she lived in Rocha, a departmental capital some 210 kilometers east of Montevideo, she was once the social worker for a plan in Lapuente in Rivera Department in Uruguay's far north. Twice a month, she would visit the plan in progress. She would leave Rocha at 7PM on a bus bound for

²²² Garcé (2017), p. 13.

Montevideo, waiting then in the capital for another two hours before catching a night bus to Rivera. In Rivera, the architect, who traveled from Tacuarembó, would wait for her at the bus station there. Then a car from the Intendencia of Rivera took them more than a hundred kilometers to the building site, where they would arrive around 8:00 AM.²²³ Today, in contrast, MEVIR keeps a stock of permanent rental cars housed in a garage adjacent to the office and sufficient in number to meet the needs of the field technicians based in Montevideo. Smaller-scale rental car agreements exist for technicians based in the interior. Improvements in the quality of Uruguay's roads have also facilitated swifter transportation to more remote field sites.

While MEVIR has always built with the supervision of skilled construction laborers, the involvement of these specialized workers has changed over time. Building in remote areas presents a particular challenge in the construction industry: Where do the workers live? Alejandro Sandobal notes how where the foremen and his laborers reside has become more formalized. In the early phase of MEVIR, one when the architects and social workers travelled in buses, the building team would find a place to rent for the first month. Using the help of the participants, they would then build the first five houses of a nucleus as quickly as possible, in order for the foremen and workers to live there during the rest of construction. They would deep clean them to "*kilómetro zero*" before participants moved in at the end of the plan.²²⁴ Today, MEVIR staff are charged with finding appropriate rental accommodations for the foremen, skilled laborers and their families for the duration of construction.

The number of construction workers is also a point of contention. Ricardo Nopitsch mentions that today the ratio of construction workers to houses in a plan is on the order of 1:2

²²³ Interview with Magela Vicentino, 22 June 2022.

²²⁴ Interview with Alejandro Sandobal, 1 June 2022.

compared with something closer to 1:10 when he joined MEVIR in the 1970s.²²⁵ Indeed, on construction sites today, the yellow hard hats of the “oficiales” often outnumber the blue ones of the participants. While keeping the mutual aid component, it is understandable that MEVIR would increase the proportion of construction hours done by professionals, in its efforts to build more quickly a greater number of homes in a wider range of places. Nevertheless, as Nopitsch warns, this also limits the degree of group bonding. Vicentino recalls labor practices that would be rejected emphatically immediately today. On the 1972 plan in Mariscal, MEVIR authorized children of participants aged fourteen and older to work four hours per shift. Cognizant of the legal concerns of the present, Vicentino nonetheless expresses the value of finding a middle ground such that teenagers can learn the building trade and feel part of the process.²²⁶ Reflecting on changes in the construction process, Mike Brennan emphasizes how MEVIR has modernized with the addition of many safety measures, not least the hard hats, limits on lifting and on what tasks can and cannot be done by participants. Safety measures have also included the hiring of a professional safety supervisor (“*técnica prevencionista*”), somebody who is often on site and who gives occasional workshops.²²⁷

Changes in the materiality of building sites are also important. Construction has become less and less “*casero*” (homemade). Beyond the fact that the current MEVIR administration is promoting the use of non-brick materials comes the matter of brick itself. As Federico Becerra emphasizes, Uruguay’s climate, where winter days go from 0 to 20 degrees Celsius, demands brick.²²⁸ A February 1970 photo from the Pueblo Celeste plan shows participants baking and drying the bricks they would use to build their homes. Around eight percent of the brick MEVIR

²²⁵ Interview with Ricardo Nopitsch, 10 June 2022.

²²⁶ Interview with Magela Vicentino, 22 June 2022.

²²⁷ Interview with Mike Brennan, 15 July 2022. As an organization, MEVIR has never seen a work-caused death.

²²⁸ Interview with Federico Becerra, 25 March 2022.

uses today is still artisanal “*ladrillo de campo*” produced in the vicinity of the plan.²²⁹ Alejandro Sandobal recalls how in the early 1990s the process of purchasing bricks was formalized to the point where MEVIR would buy from “*barraqueros*” (In Uruguayan Spanish, a *barraca* is akin to a warehouse), rather than directly from the “*ladrilleros*” (brick makers) themselves. Over time, many *ladrilleros* have also adapted to become official providers according to MEVIR’s purchasing guidelines. As with brick, sand is a material that MEVIR has long sought locally. Sandobal recalls an instance around 2000, when MEVIR was fined for illegally taking sand.²³⁰ The cement that MEVIR sources to mix with sand (see more in Chapter Four) is also worth pointing out. Gabriel Moreno notes that as part of MEVIR’s standardization and safety measures, it switched in the early 2010s from 50-kilogram cement bags to 25-kilogram ones, something that has positive long-term health impacts on construction workers.²³¹ When I ask Sandobal what he sees as the most important changes in construction, he highlights the transition from cesspits to drainage.²³²

Urbanism

No two nuclei are created equal, even if all are recognizable as a MEVIR nucleus. There are three major variations in how MEVIR nuclei have transformed over time, each of which has its own historical pressures. The size of plots on which any given home in a MEVIR nucleus is situated has decreased. This is one of the most significant changes Alejandro Sandobal has seen during his 41 years at MEVIR.²³³ The primary cause of this is the rising cost of land. Not only

²²⁹ Interview with Daniel García Trovero, 7 November 2022.

²³⁰ Interview with Alejandro Sandobal 8 November 2022.

²³¹ Interview with Gabriel Moreno, 9 June 2022.

²³² Interview with Alejandro Sandobal, 1 June 2022.

²³³ Interview with Alejandro Sandobal, 1 June 2022.

have the lots themselves grown smaller, but MEVIR is also building more and more plans where one building contains two homes, and the separation of lots is marked by a dividing wall. Visually, this gives adjoined homes (these are known within MEVIR as the Tambores typology) a less rural quality. While this form of building may be good for MEVIR's finances and bolstering the tally of homes it has built, its tangible consequences include less privacy. It also provides less room for subsistence gardening and for raising small livestock.²³⁴

Beyond the size of plots is the matter of the size of nuclei as a whole. Ricardo Nopitsch recalls how the ideal nucleus size in the 1980s was between 40 to 50 homes. Starting in the mid-1990s many plans reached up to 100 homes, though more recently, MEVIR has turned away from building such large nuclei (a passage in Chapter Four returns to this discussion).

The decision of where to site nuclei within a given locality has also been a point of debate within MEVIR. No longer will just any land suffice. As Cristina Sienna observes, MEVIR often used to build on land simply due to its cost (or in the case of donations, a lack thereof). There are many more factors to consider today, however. Whether the land in question has pre-existing infrastructure (water, power, sanitation, and roads) becomes a deciding element. MEVIR has even turned down donated land for this reason.²³⁵ Motivated in part by Gallinal's own observations of the shortcomings of early plans, there has also been a shift towards building nuclei within the existing platted streets of a town (which often exhibit a very limited building occupation, such as the example of Isla Patrulla recounted in Chapter Five), rather than on the outskirts. However, this is sometimes easier said than done. Magela Vicentino recalls the second

²³⁴ As a rule of thumb, the more remote the area, the more likely that a family will have small livestock on their MEVIR plot.

²³⁵ Interview with Cristina Sienna, 22 March 2022.

plan in Mariscal, Lavalleja where MEVIR tried to build inside the town rather than on the outskirts but ran into difficulty because of complicated land titling issues.²³⁶



Figure 11: Each MEVIR home bears a plaque with the organization’s ovenbird (*hornero*) logo. Each house also receives a number, situating it historically in the chronological order in which MEVIR homes have been built. These plaques are symbolic of how MEVIR has evolved. On the left is a hand-painted hornero from the early 1970s in Sacachispas, Soriano Department (photo by author, 17 July 2022). On the right is a stack of horneros ready to be placed on new homes in Capilla del Sauce, Florida Department (photo by author, 13 September 2022).

While MEVIR homes are recognizable to the trained eye as a signature feature of the contemporary Uruguayan rural landscape, the surefire way to know if a home was built by this institution is to look for the plaque next to the door. The plaques are named “*horneros*” after MEVIR’s logo, which depicts the ovenbird (*Furnarius rufus*) that builds mud nests resembling wood-fired ovens. The symbolism is apparent in that the MEVIR participant families are also building their own metaphorical nests.²³⁷ Each house receives its own hornero number in the

²³⁶ Interview with Magela Vicentino, 22 June 2022.

²³⁷ Martínez Coenda notes the paradox of a bird’s nest made of mud as the symbol for an organization whose *raison d’être* was to remove humans from mud houses (2022, pp. 99-100).

order in which it was built. The very first MEVIR homes, which were built in Casupá, bear the lowest hornero numbers.²³⁸ Today, MEVIR has surpassed 33,000 horneros. Thus, beyond simply looking at the architecture and the condition of homes, the hornero number is also a way of dating the home in its historical context. If you go to the first plan in Casupá, to Pueblo Celeste, and a handful of other plans, you can find the original hornero plaques, each individually hand painted by an artist named Elsa Tiscornia. As an example of how MEVIR is less and less homemade, the horneros today are not individually crafted.

Politics

As the above chronology makes clear, MEVIR has become increasingly tied to electoral politics and more closely integrated with different parts of the Uruguayan state. On both accounts, this is due in no small part to the prestige MEVIR has earned from its social impact.²³⁹ The politicization and political integration of MEVIR shows up in multiple forms and to varying degrees.

As MEVIR expanded across territory, it began to incorporate more and more tasks. As Garcé points out, a decent home requires the existence of a combination of services, things such as potable water, sanitation, electricity, and access to health care, education, police, courts, and daycares, among others. Over time, MEVIR, to ensure the supply of these services, has made agreements with different institutions of the state who work in these areas.²⁴⁰ In MEVIR

²³⁸ In 2020, the retired MEVIR architect Ariel Etchebarne conducted a survey of the current condition of the first five horneros, which are not in a nucleated plan, but rather dispersed across Casupá. My thanks are due to Lucho Oliva, *alcalde* of Casupá, for sharing this document with me.

²³⁹ Garcé (2017), p. 14.

²⁴⁰ Garcé (2017), p. 13.

parlance, these agreements are known as “*convenios*”, a word heard often around the office and at its events.

Maria Fajardo is a member of the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Uruguay’s legislature. She was a MEVIR participant in the first plan in Palmitas, Soriano (where Vicentino was the social worker). Fajardo stresses that one of MEVIR’s achievements is how it has brought together all levels of government.²⁴¹ Hugo Javiel emphasizes the importance of the word “*convenio*” to the effect that the organizations involved are not MEVIR’s clients, but rather their collaborators.²⁴²

Drawing on the expertise of people in other arms of the state has been a part of MEVIR’s fabric since its inception. Highlighting how early MEVIR was not as much of an in-group of *estancieros* as many people might think, Rosario Bisio recalls how Gallinal asked organizations in public education, public health, and public safety to propose various people they saw fit to integrate departmental commissions.²⁴³ At the local scale, she notes that students and teachers from the *Universidad de Trabajo del Uruguay* (Uruguayan University of Work), or UTU, akin to the national vocational school, helped to make the doors for the MEVIR homes in Pueblo Celeste. Victoria Morena, the selection director, reminds that MEVIR has always had *convenios*, but they have become not only greater in number, but also more institutionalized over time.²⁴⁴ In the previous administration, MEVIR created a position for the express purpose of managing *convenios*. That the current MEVIR administration, along with the one immediately preceding it, is leaning much more heavily on *convenios* is linked of course in part with political salience

²⁴¹ Interview with Maria Fajardo, 27 July 2022. When I ask Fajardo to tell me when the plan was built, she dates it not to a calendar year, but to the age of her children (implying the plan is from around 1990). She is far from my only informant to do this.

²⁴² Interview with Hugo Javiel, 8 June 2022.

²⁴³ Interview with Rosario Bisio, 11 November 2022.

²⁴⁴ Interview with Victoria Morena, 8 June 2022.

(more room for photo opportunities and press releases). Yet the move beyond housing also comes out of necessity. This is clear from Balarini's article on the PIPL, from Sienna's efforts to acquire more land for MEVIR following the 2008 Urban Planning Law, and from the fact that MEVIR has since used up much of the land it had formerly controlled.

MEVIR may be an increasingly powerful node in a network of state actors, but it is also subject to increasing integration with pre-existing housing policies. As Garcé states, there is a growing interest, coming not just from political parties but also the public housing system, to integrate MEVIR's action in a planned manner into a general strategy.²⁴⁵ MEVIR maintains its own offices. It is de jure a separate parastatal institution, and all of its building activities are separate from the MVOT. In practice, however MEVIR is increasingly becoming brought into the fold of the MVOT. This is true in that the MEVIR president's salary comes from the MVOT. And no less than 70 percent of MEVIR's budget is administered through the MVOT.²⁴⁶ Whether MEVIR is now a de facto part of the MVOT is up for debate. However, an informal exchange in July 2022 between Delgado and Irene Moreira, the then-minister of housing, following the launch of a program between MEVIR and the ministry to refurbish informal settlements (*asentamientos*) in cities, shows how important MEVIR is to the MVOT. Delgado noted to Moreira (she had closed her own public speech by saying it would be silly of the ministry to not use MEVIR's efficiency and expertise to address this problem) that without MEVIR there would be way more *asentamientos*. Moreira responded that "*MEVIR es mi nene mimado*" (MEVIR is my spoiled child).²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Garcé (2017), p. 14.

²⁴⁶ The MEVIR president's official title is *Director Nacional de Vivienda Rural* (National Director of Rural Housing).

²⁴⁷ Field notes, 4 July 2022. This event took place in the offices of Uruguay's executive branch located on Montevideo's Plaza Independencia.

The influence of partisan and electoral politics on MEVIR is more pronounced in some spheres of the organization than it is in others. For example, at a strategic planning meeting in June 2022, Delgado declared that it would be best to inaugurate a particular plan in early 2024 for political purposes (Uruguay's next general election is in October 2024).²⁴⁸ A small number of plans have specific political salience, but housing need always takes precedence, and research and strategic planning serve as a check on the whims of power. The value placed on Sierra, Morena, and the research director Yamila Meseguez as independent technicians during strategic planning meetings illustrates this. In my observation, they are the ones running the meetings, and the political appointees are there mainly to add their own two cents as appropriate.

While the politicization of MEVIR may make it harder for some employees to share their thoughts and feelings, the grasp of politics on the institution has plenty of positives. First and foremost, MEVIR's objective is to build homes. The competition inherent in politics and the fine margins of Uruguayan elections together drive building more and better.²⁴⁹ Rather than *estancieros*, the local leaders on the ground that deal most with MEVIR are elected *intendentes*. As elected officials, they have an incentive for policies to appeal to a wide range of people. Democratic politics has increased the stakes of MEVIR over time, and it has incorporated a diversity of opinions. While some current and retired employees yearn for the days when MEVIR was less directly connected to electoral politics, decoupling the institution from *quinquenios* would be nigh on impossible, both for logistical reasons, and because there is simply too much to lose.

²⁴⁸ Field notes, 14 June 2022.

²⁴⁹ Hugo Javiel notes that political competition across regimes is the impulse to build more and better (interview, 8 June 2022).

Financing

MEVIR has never lost its funding, and the management of these funds is an example of how the organization has become more formalized over time. Gabriel Moreno, the human resources director, explains that only in 2018 did MEVIR begin to do a detailed budget for construction. Before then, the cost of each house was a ballpark figure, the “*número de Jaime*” (Jaime’s number), named after an employee. Moreno marvels at how a company that moves 60 to 70 million U.S. dollars per year only monitored any money spent after the fact, which is a similar conclusion to the one arrived at by Ares and Pini thirty years earlier. Moreno highlights how the current administration is the first to resolve the 2003 *Ley de Fideicomiso* (Trust Law), which allows MEVIR to keep more money in flow. Previously, funding sources outside of MEVIR’s main budget were resisted. Moreno credits this to the survival skills learned in the private sector by Gastón Diz, MEVIR’s lead accountant, while he worked at Parmalat.²⁵⁰

Beyond being more innovative in accessing money, an important financial shift has been the declining amount of MEVIR’s budget that goes directly to housing, a phenomenon which is concomitant with a rise in the number of office employees. Adolfo García da Rosa remarks that as a general trend, less and less of MEVIR’s money goes into construction.²⁵¹ Rafael Sanguinetti recalls that when he was on the board in the late 1980s, there was a general agreement that ninety percent of the money in MEVIR had to go directly to the houses themselves.²⁵²

Nonetheless, as García da Rosa signals, despite its having a variety of financial moments, MEVIR has never stopped. This is because there has always been political recognition of its

²⁵⁰ Interview with Gabriel Moreno, 9 June 2022.

²⁵¹ Interview with Adolfo García da Rosa, 15 December 2022.

²⁵² Interview with Rafael Sanguinetti, 4 March 2022.

viability. García da Rosa makes the important point that a MEVIR-like program needs state support, because rural housing is an expensive and low-return investment.²⁵³

Selection and Research

MEVIR has incorporated new methods in its research of localities and selection of participants. Behind this lie the increasing integration of academic knowledge and networks into MEVIR's planning. Ricardo Nopitsch recalls how other than the agronomy and veterinary faculties of the UdelaR (ones to which Gallinal was very well linked), the academy by and large turned its back on MEVIR's founder. Only when the European Union project came to town, Nopitsch argues, did the Architecture Faculty of the UdelaR start to care about MEVIR.²⁵⁴

The main product of increased academic knowledge is the shift away from local commissions and towards a more empirical process of selecting localities and participants. Starting in the mid 1980s, Enrique Lessa as general manager and Ricardo Nopitsch as the supervisor of architects, pushed for a stronger connection to the academy and the inclusion of territorial studies as a way of building bridges to people who dismissed MEVIR as Gallinal's paternalism.²⁵⁵ Daniel García Trovero recalls how more of this research was done in the 1990s, though still by architects and social workers rather than a team of trained specialists to lend an interdisciplinary social scientific perspective on the built environment.²⁵⁶ The prominence of the European-trained Sienna in MEVIR represents the culmination of this process. Both through the composition of the board and in the hiring of staff, the number of people in MEVIR connected to the academy grew under FA leadership. Along with this came critiques from the new board about

²⁵³ Interview with Adolfo García da Rosa, 15 December 2022.

²⁵⁴ Interview with Ricardo Nopitsch, 10 June 2022. This corroborates with Pfeiff's comments, cited earlier.

²⁵⁵ Interview with Ricardo Nopitsch, 10 June 2022.

²⁵⁶ Interview with Daniel García Trovero, 7 November 2022.

how MEVIR had done (or not done) planning, such as those outlined above by Balarini. As I discuss in the next chapter, the most professional and thorough territorial studies about which localities to build in took place in the early and mid 2010s. Critiques of MEVIR building plans in unsustainable locales and building on sites without thinking about how that land is situated in relation to an existing community have an economic logic. Álvaro López Gallero, a retired geographer, who wrote a brief report on MEVIR in 1998 and continues to enjoy stopping at MEVIR plans on his travels through the interior, comments to me that MEVIR does not just throw money at a problem. It studies matters meticulously before intervening. Territorial studies help MEVIR prioritize where to act and these also oblige the institution to look continuously for land.²⁵⁷

The emphasis on technocratic processes and the elimination of local commissions is not to say that MEVIR ceases to listen to people on the ground, however. As I will show in the next chapter, the rise of technocratic thinking and planning in MEVIR is precisely a way of making local knowledge more formalized, widely accessible, and implementable in tangible ways.

Many words in Rioplatense Spanish are taken from the Italian, a product of mass migration from Italy.²⁵⁸ One example is the verb “*aggiornarse*”, which means “to update” or “to modernize”. This Italianism summarizes many of MEVIR’s transitions and decisions. A recent case involves the way participants are selected. Gabriel Moreno tells the story of how Juan Larrayoz, MEVIR’s lead IT planner, overcame as recently as 2018 great resistance from social workers against implementing a digital system. This was a system designed to use tablets in order to input data collected at sign-ups for plans, and one that would replace the pen and paper system MEVIR social workers had formerly used. As Moreno recalls, the use of a digital system

²⁵⁷ Interview with Álvaro López Gallero, 30 March 2022.

²⁵⁸ Nearly half of Uruguayans have at least some Italian ancestry.

had never occurred to the social workers, who made anti-digital arguments such as fearing the loss of human contact. The ease with which its employees go on autopilot, Moreno notes, is a downside of MEVIR valuing longevity. “When you’ve only worked in one place, it’s hard to see how things work elsewhere”, he says.²⁵⁹

An important component of this technocracy is objectivity. A frequent sight in the mailbox of the MEVIR president are signed letters from groups of people around the country, who are asking for MEVIR to bring a plan to their town. While MEVIR continues to read these letters, they hold little weight in the overall process of choosing where to build. The process of selecting which families will be part of a plan has also evolved to become more objective. In MEVIR’s early days, notes Morena, the selection director, there was only a sole social worker who met with prospective families and chose participants over time.²⁶⁰ The transition to a more explicit and concrete points system was formalized in 2000 with the creation of the *Unidad de Registros de Demanda* (Unit of Record of Demand), or URDEM. This homogenized information, facilitated administrative work, processing of data, and compiling reports for the selection of participants. URDEM’s points system also unified and codified the selection criteria MEVIR had used since its founding, ensuring MEVIR’s target population would continue to be determined objectively.²⁶¹ A 2012 program further refined selection processes and criteria.²⁶² As Yamila Meseguez, MEVIR’s research director, explains, the “*público*” (or audience) of MEVIR is always the same, but each administration adjusts its focus a little differently.²⁶³ In other words, MEVIR maintains its broad social and geographical mission by always serving the rural poor,

²⁵⁹ Interview with Gabriel Moreno, 9 June 2022.

²⁶⁰ Interview with Victoria Morena, 8 June 2022.

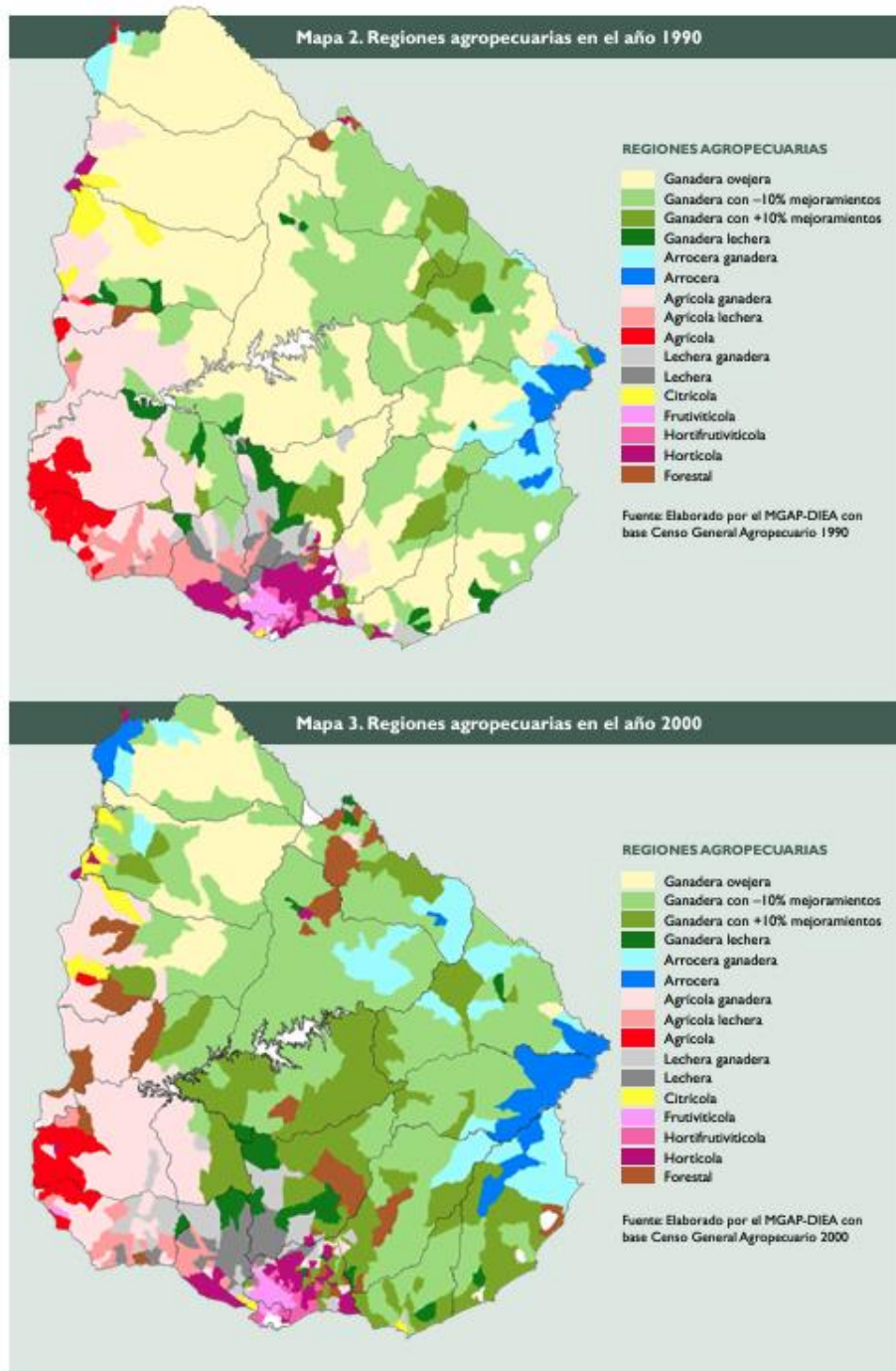
²⁶¹ Garcé (2017), p. 14.

²⁶² Garcé (2017), p. 14.

²⁶³ Interview with Yamila Meseguez, 4 April 2022.

but the question at any given time is just how rural and how poor. Those two categories of rural and poor are not set in stone and MEVIR acts based on both political and economic imperatives.

MEVIR's Expansion of its Offerings in a "New Rurality"



Mapa 4. Regiones agropecuarias en el año 2011

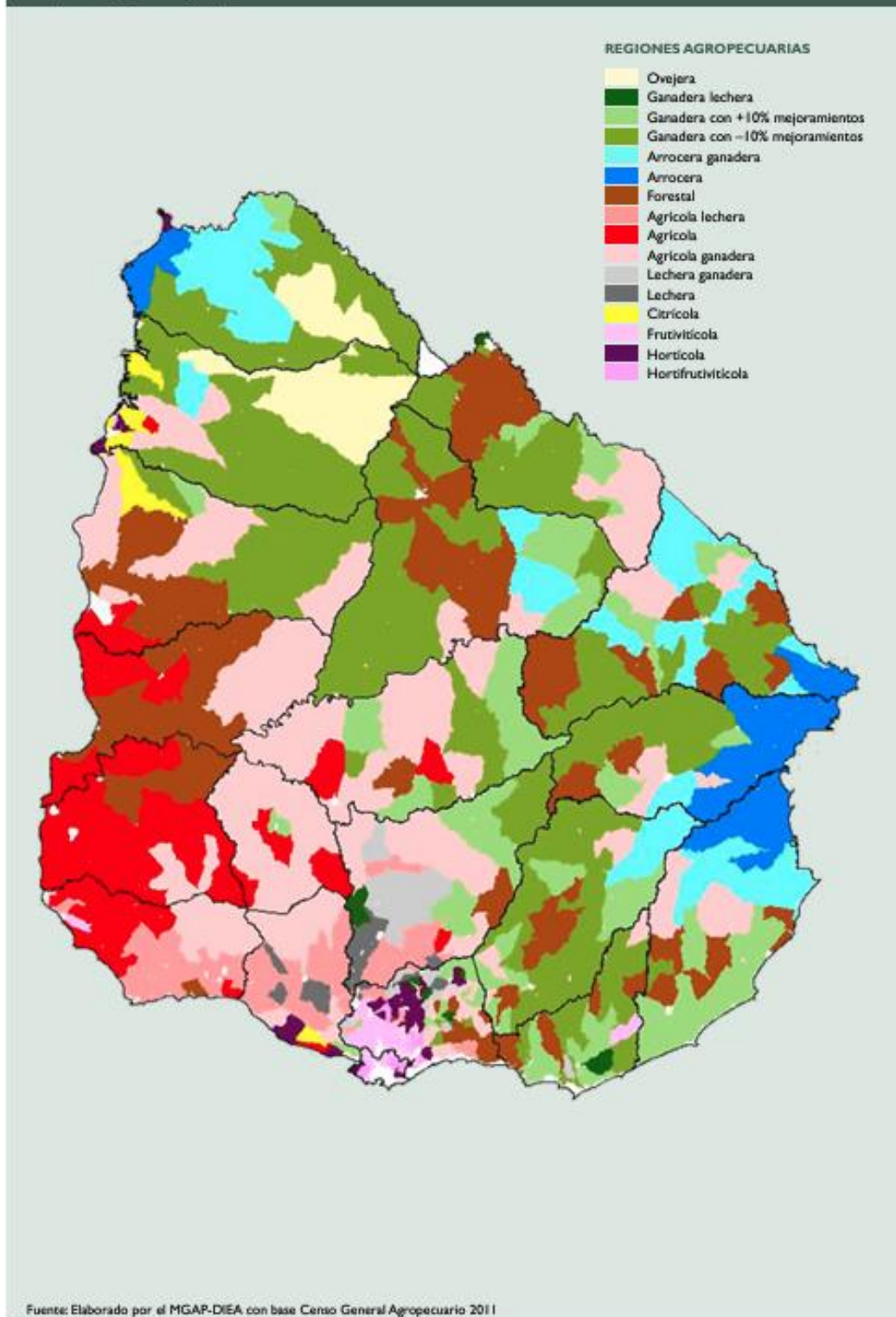


Figure 12: This time series of maps depicts Uruguay's rural land use regions in 1990, 2000, and 2011. Many areas once devoted to sheep ranching (beige) and cattle ranching (shades of green) have given way to agroforestry (brown). A significant rise in grain crops (red) has occurred in the southwest of the country (source: Ministerio de Ganadería, Agricultura y Pesca, 2015).

As the definitions of rural and poor fluctuate, MEVIR's target population is a moving target. As such, MEVIR has adapted its offerings. From the chronology section of this chapter, it should be clear that MEVIR's production line has a greater variety now than it did around a half century ago. The main exponents of this are the *Unidades Productivas*, dispersed housing within the *planta urbana* and *area rural* of a locality, repairs of homes, and the *convenios* that lead MEVIR to build structures in rural areas for other state activities, like police and fire. The demography of Uruguay also impacts how MEVIR approaches its provision of services. In a country with virtually no population growth at the national level, and even less in MEVIR's target areas (ones which contain plenty of empty houses), housing policy must be more nuanced than simply to "build more homes".²⁶⁴

An implicit element in the move beyond the provision only of housing, and mainly of nucleated housing destined largely for a population of ranching wage laborers, is the sustained commitment to MEVIR as a brake on rural-to-urban migration. Noting small-scale owner-producers sometimes lives in worse conditions than rural wage laborers, Garcé contends that MEVIR has stemmed the migration of small producers to cities. It has achieved this through programs such as the *Unidades Productivas*.²⁶⁵ Juan Pablo Delgado, the current MEVIR president, notes that the phrase "*Construir Comunidad*" (Building Community), which he chose as the MEVIR slogan to be used under the current administration, was not a phrase Gallinal used himself. But it is a slogan inspired by his vision, expressing the key idea that having access to

²⁶⁴ I thank Daniel García Trovero for first making this point to me. While this attention to nuance is real, it is important to note that MEVIR's growth rate outpaces the growth rate of Uruguay's general population. This has grown only grown from 2.6 million people in 1963 to 3.4 million people in 2023. Garcé shows that from 1967 to 1985, MEVIR built an average of 136 homes per year, from 1985-1989, 370, from 1990-2000 more than 500, and from 2005 onward, more than 1000. Garcé (2017), p. 14.

²⁶⁵ Garcé (2017), p. 14.

different kinds of services together with the housing will allow families and communities to stay together, so that they will not need to migrate to the city.²⁶⁶

Driving the changes in target populations and the types of MEVIR interventions are the shifting realities of rural life in Uruguay. The rural sphere is no longer fully contiguous with the agricultural one (let alone ranching) and it is increasingly intertwined with the urban.²⁶⁷ As Sienna claims, MEVIR is now for a “broadened rurality”.²⁶⁸ Delgado explains how there is more and more grey area between the city and countryside, both in the increasing variety of personal mobility beyond the use of horses, and in how more rural children are accessing high school education (which usually means that they must travel to a larger town) or tertiary studies (which are concentrated in Montevideo).²⁶⁹

In his 1998 sketch of some key elements of MEVIR, López Gallero stated that MEVIR authorities assumed a position of not offering homes to individuals directly linked to Montevideo. More and more often, this question comes up in MEVIR’s selection processes in the south of the country. MEVIR social worker Silvia Cuello remarked in 2022, while interviewing families for an upcoming plan in Casupá, how some of the prospective participants had service jobs in Montevideo, a thing that would have been much less common when she started at MEVIR in the late 1990s.²⁷⁰ On a site visit I took to Cardal and other towns in the dairy belt (*cuenca lechera*) of southwestern Florida Department, I learned that upwards of a quarter of households have a member who works in Montevideo, situated around ninety minutes away. Beyond demand factors in the rural labor market (and interviewees have pointed out to me this

²⁶⁶ Interview with Juan Pablo Delgado, 8 November 2022.

²⁶⁷ See Brandt (2019), p. 52-55 on the cultural-historical distinctions between ranching and agricultural labor in Uruguay.

²⁶⁸ See Sienna Gelber (2020), p. 8 for a definition of “*nueva ruralidad*”.

²⁶⁹ Interview with Juan Pablo Delgado, 8 November 2022.

²⁷⁰ Field notes, 3 May 2022.

was more stable in Gallinal's time), this possibility of working in the capital is facilitated by the higher frequency of bus connections and the density of the road network in south-central Uruguay. This debate is also relevant across the country. All departmental capitals show their own capacities to pull in labor.²⁷¹

During our conversation in the courtyard of the UdelaR's architecture faculty, Adolfo García da Rosa gives valuable perspective on Uruguay's "new rurality." This is a trend present across the hemisphere, but one with its own flavor in the Oriental Republic of Uruguay. Starting in the early twentieth century, the urban-rural divide increased over time. This means that cities developed at a faster rate than the countryside, and there was a rapid process of urban consolidation. Meanwhile, development in the campo was much more stagnant.²⁷² This difference was dramatic until about the 1990s, which saw the arrival of motorcycles, and then cellphones. A soccer analogy can once more be invoked. Before the 1990s, García da Rosa explains, if you lived in Salto city, you watched the World Cup on TV, but in the campo, this meant listening to someone's radio. In his work with the Intendencia of Salto during the 1980s, García da Rosa fought hard to bring a telephone box into each town in rural Salto, so that people would not need to rely on the town "telefonista", the person who controlled all the communications in any given town, because the only telephone resided at their house. As such, telefonistas were privy to all calls, a potential infringement on privacy impeding the flow of some information.

²⁷¹ Some examples of the geography of rural labor markets appear in Chapter Five, within the section about the preparing of deed signings.

²⁷² López Gallero cites data from the 1990 *Censo Agropecuario* (Agriculture and Ranching Census) that Uruguay had 140,430 workers employed on agriculture and ranching establishments. This represented 81 percent of the total in 1980, and a half of the total at the middle of the twentieth century (1998, p. 9).

Communication improvements provide one example of the new rurality. Transportation is another. Cheap Chinese motorcycles change time-space relations in small towns and dispersed rural areas, where people had earlier traveled almost exclusively on foot, bicycle, or horseback. As time conquers space, word diffuses faster about topics like salaries. These shifting realities, García da Rosa exclaims, constitute the world of MEVIR.

García da Rosa also highlights how MEVIR has intentionally sought to address demographic and family matters in the rural sphere. In a ranching model that predominated into the 1980s, many remote places where MEVIR works, he notes, used to have only have women, children, and the elderly, with working men only showing up for a couple days every two weeks on brief respites from estancia labor. In this arrangement of time and place, García da Rosa contends, women suffered the most. Men at least ate well on the ranches, with healthy amounts of *asado* and *estofado* (stewed meat). MEVIR, by contrast with the estancias, is a conscious way of keeping the male heads of households at home more often. In broad strokes, as García da Rosa argues, Uruguay's "*paisanos*" today are more modern and less feudal.²⁷³ This is on account of shifting technologies, labor market demands, and MEVIR.

Beyond technological changes in communication and transportation linking the countryside ever closer to the city, an agro-export model of new commodities (namely soybeans, and eucalyptus for cellulose pulp) has accelerated the expulsion of rural dwellers (especially of small producers) from the countryside. García da Rosa insists on the significance of MEVIR going against the grain ("*MEVIR va a contraflecha*") of these trends.²⁷⁴ The institution seeks to stem the flow of rural-to-urban migration, because it knows from experience that this migration is often a reluctant decision for individuals and families. Moreover, migration from the cities to

²⁷³ Interview with Adolfo García da Rosa, 15 December 2022.

²⁷⁴ Interview with Adolfo García da Rosa, 15 December 2022.

the campo is minimal, even among people with ties to the countryside. In his thirty years as a MEVIR technician, García da Rosa met only a single person who moved from the city to work in the campo. This individual was a gas station attendant in Salto and had married a countryside-dweller. García da Rosa approves of MEVIR promoting people to remain in remote areas, because the institution is a key catalyst to keeping Uruguay's rural economy diversified. "Our country can't be a monoculture of a woodpulp factory", he says.²⁷⁵ Cristina Sienna adds that the growth of agroforestry (as much as it might help Uruguay in a macroeconomic sense), does little for development in rural areas. Since agroforestry is so highly mechanized, it does not offer much permanent work in the tree plantation areas. Forestry workers tend to live in cities and commute when they need. Sienna also notes how forestry work often requires more formal vocational training than with *peones* on ranches.²⁷⁶

Attending to these shifts in rural employment have been important for MEVIR to maintain its viability. As Rafael Sanguinetti emphasizes, hardly anyone lives on an estancia anymore. This represents a massive change that gives rural workers both more independence and more community.²⁷⁷ It is a trend, I add, that has served well the acceleration of MEVIR. Mike Brennan, the agronomist, makes the key point that MEVIR does not build for people based on their employment, nor does it generate company towns.²⁷⁸ It is important to return to the fact that Gallinal was not content to build just in Cerro Colorado for workers from San Pedro de Timote. The original aim of MEVIR was precisely for people to have their own home, one *independent* of their work.

²⁷⁵ Interview with Adolfo García da Rosa, 15 December 2022. In 2022, sulfate chemical wood pulp accounted for 15.4 percent of Uruguay's exports by value, second only to bovine meat at 21.5 percent. See MIT's Observatory for Economic Complexity for visualizations of this data.

²⁷⁶ Interview with Cristina Sienna, 22 March 2022.

²⁷⁷ Interview with Rafael Sanguinetti, 4 March 2022.

²⁷⁸ Interview with Mike Brennan, 15 July 2022.

Though MEVIR has always been an explicitly national-scale project, and it has multiple interventions in all nineteen departments (this includes some dispersed interventions in the rural portion of Montevideo Department), new ruralities and MEVIR's expanded offerings and research have had two important impacts in the geography of the organization's interventions.

The first is a rise in building in areas where ranching has historically not been the predominant land use. The chief example is Canelones, the department which contains the highest degree of crop farming, and, as discussed in the previous chapter, exhibits a cultural landscape distinct from Uruguay farther inland.²⁷⁹ A graph in Álvaro López Gallero's 1998 report illustrates how MEVIR had built far fewer homes in Canelones than in other regions with a comparable population.²⁸⁰ López Gallero managed to calculate the mean geographic center of MEVIR's population in 1996 to near Paso de los Toros in Tacuarembó Department, a town which lies considerably further north than the mean geographic center of Uruguay's overall rural population.²⁸¹ The shift to building more in Canelones coincided with the rise of the UPs. Many of these were located within Canelones, an area where small rural producers tend to live on the same land that they cultivate.²⁸² In the current administration, building in Canelones has become a priority. Indeed, MEVIR is timing many plans in Canelones to be inaugurated during the 2024 election cycle, a phenomenon strongly influenced by the department's bellwether political status.²⁸³

²⁷⁹ See also: Brandt (2022), p. 145.

²⁸⁰ López Gallero (1998), p. 8.

²⁸¹ Interview with Álvaro López Gallero, 30 March 2022.

²⁸² A notable example is Paso de la Cadena, an area in the north of Canelones, which has seen 109 interventions in Area Rural, but only 44 nucleated homes. Source: MEVIR – Evaluación y Monitoreo (2022), p. 4.

²⁸³ MEVIR erected a booth at the *Fiesta Nacional del Pollo y de la Gallina* (National Chicken and Hen Festival) in San Bautista, Canelones in February 2024. The booth contained interactive displays highlighting the institution's recent achievements and upcoming plans particular to Canelones.

The second impact of MEVIR's expanded offerings on the institution's geographical footprint is a renewed focus on the larger of the small towns. Despite an exodus from the campo, demand for MEVIR homes has increased over time, note retired MEVIR agronomist Luis Silveira and Yanina Aniotz. The latter works with planning and selection, and is the only economist employed by MEVIR.²⁸⁴ In the earliest plans, these two add, there were more likely to be additional lands remaining in MEVIR's hands after a project finished.²⁸⁵ As something indicative of a grey area where the rural takes on many urban characteristics, Silveira and Aniotz note that demand for MEVIR his highest in the larger of small towns, places like Vichadero (3,698), and Lascano (pop. 7,645).²⁸⁶ The current administration's success at including even larger towns through the Urgent Consideration Law shows MEVIR's desire to address unmet demand for housing. At what point does rurality end? MEVIR illustrates that rurality is a negotiable concept.

EVALUATING MEVIR'S EVOLUTION

MEVIR no longer appears to be the most accurate acronym for an organization that has broadened beyond its original intent. However, changing the name would make little business sense. The noun MEVIR is as ingrained in the verbal landscape of rural Uruguay as the houses it builds are in the visual. Juan Pablo Delgado likens MEVIR to another respected Uruguayan brand, and one also containing multiple product lines. Conaprole, Uruguay's most famous dairy,

²⁸⁴ Interview with Luis Silveira and Yanina Aniotz, 17 July 2017.

²⁸⁵ A case study is Pueblo Lavalleja, which is located in a sheep shearing area in Salto. Rosario Bisio recounts that the town's first plan was built on fourteen hectares of donated land. This land was originally given by a rural producer to the Catholic Church and it was destined to be used for social ends just as the Church saw fit. The first, second, and fourth Pueblo Lavalleja MEVIR plans were built on this land, which have by now used up all the entire area of the original donation. Pueblo Lavalleja's third plan, a larger one that housed 59 families, was built on land bought by MEVIR (interview, 11 November 2022).

²⁸⁶ Interview with Luis Silveira and Yanina Aniotz, 17 July 2017.

has branched out from its staples of milk, cheese, and dulce de leche, and now sells hamburger patties.²⁸⁷ In MEVIR's case, nucleated homes in remote rural areas or preexisting small towns are its most recognizable product, yet the brand's prestige and the institution's competency have allowed it to expand into other products like the UPs and dispersed dwellings.

Though insalubrious homes continue to exist across the Uruguayan countryside, they are nothing on the order they were in the middle of the twentieth century. When *rancheríos* ceased to be a pressing problem, that did not mean there was nothing left for MEVIR to do. The institution has changed given the necessities that arise in the rural sphere, and it is remarkable that MEVIR has never been close to being in danger of closing. There is criticism from some quarters that MEVIR is no longer the organization conceived of and presided over by Alberto Gallinal, but an institution that continued to adhere to rural Uruguayan life as it was in 1967 would not have survived. As Victoria Morena argues, there is a fallacy when comparing the MEVIR of the past with the one of the present, because while “the conditions of your country determine some things, your actions determine others”.²⁸⁸ As Beatriz Argimón, the current Vice President of the Republic, claimed in a May 2022 ceremony at Uruguay's Legislative Palace, one where the national postal service launched a stamp to commemorate MEVIR's 55th anniversary, “MEVIR is a public policy that has succeeded in interpreting social reality”.²⁸⁹

On second glance, however the name Movement for the Eradication of Unhealthy Rural Housing not only keeps the institution connected to its origins but continues to highlight why MEVIR works. Delving into the words “movement”, “poor” (as a more comprehensive term for

²⁸⁷ Interview with Juan Pablo Delgado, 8 November 2022.

²⁸⁸ Interview with Victoria Morena, 8 June 2022.

²⁸⁹ Field notes, 5 May 2022.

unhealthy), “rural”, and “dwelling” (as a more holistic term for housing), shows how this is the case.

MEVIR is no longer a social **movement** in the traditional sense. But MEVIR did establish a togetherness and an institutional sense of belonging which remains today. Moreover, the state continues to support the movement with its coffers, and there is continued excitement of people up and down the country to build and live in a MEVIR home. Most importantly, the constant presence of mutual aid within a sea of variables is the factor that most distinguishes MEVIR as a social phenomenon. MEVIR’s critics may deem it a regressive social movement on account of its historical context (meaning that MEVIR as a top-down process impeded bottom-up ways of organizing for rural social housing). However, the fact that many local people around rural Uruguay continue to organize and write letters to MEVIR asking for the organization to bring a plan to their towns bears elements of a social movement. Though these requests come at a dispersed town-by-town scale, they bear witness to the reach of MEVIR as a national movement. In other words, the bottom-up has responded favorably to the top-down. MEVIR is in demand.

Chagas disease has long since left Uruguay, but helping people in **poverty** has always remained MEVIR’s goal. Even if MEVIR has recognized, implicitly at some times and explicitly at others, that housing alone does not lift people out of poverty, having a home of one’s own, especially one that its resident helped to build, is a key step in extending personal liberties. It promotes self-confidence, allows families a better place to grow, and decreases housing dependent on labor relationships.

MEVIR may change with a changing rurality, but the geographical focus remains fundamentally **rural** in the sense of supporting people who do not live in cities of 15,000 people

or more, and to foment development as much as possible, in places that are in danger of becoming moribund or obsolete by giving people more reasons to stay there.

MEVIR's typology of homes, although it has reduced the size of plots, may urbanize the countryside. But MEVIR's expertise as a construction company lies in building one-story homes with yards, not apartment buildings. Time and again at public events, its leadership and high-ranking national politicians point to the importance of MEVIR as a project that allows people to **dwell** where they want to live.

MEVIR has “aggiornado” with new technologies, materials, laws, and social mores. MEVIR has swung back and forth across Uruguay's political pendulum, which, unlike some of its neighbors, means between center-right and center-left.²⁹⁰ MEVIR has seen new generations of leaders and technicians that have brought their own imprint onto the organization. And it has modulated its concepts of “dwelling”, “rural”, and “poverty”.

The previous chapter outlined how the buy-in of the state, the workplace, and the participants are together what define MEVIR as a viable institution. This chapter expanded on MEVIR's historical foundation to show that what keeps these three actors in a broad consensus in favor of this institution is that the concepts of “dwelling”, “rural”, and “poverty”, as much as these have been debated and modified for conjunctural reasons along its history, remain the three untouchable concepts that make MEVIR a salient idea. The subsequent chapters illustrate how MEVIR technicians connect these concepts in their work throughout the country.

²⁹⁰ Teresa Sangiovanni (field notes, 10 November 2022) observes that many of these changes (whether political or not) in MEVIR are never fully consolidated before they are discarded.

Chapter Three

“Sinónimo de la alegría”: Preparing a Place

Before MEVIR lays the first brick of a plan, its technicians and leaders visit the town on multiple occasions, while also maintaining contact from headquarters.²⁹¹ Each time, they engage with the place for a specific purpose as they prepare the plan. This process leading up to construction constitutes a reciprocal exchange wherein MEVIR learns as much as possible about the locality, while also disseminating its own information about how MEVIR works, so that locals can understand MEVIR’s intervention as transparently as possible. This chapter proceeds chronologically from the earliest stage of research and planning where to build towards the final stages of preparing the site for a plan that has been approved and announced. Rather than centering on one field site, like the following chapter on mutual aid construction, this chapter provides a composite picture of the process, with my account of each stage focusing on a different place as MEVIR comes to town. I draw on my ethnographic field notes from visits to multiple towns between March and November 2022. For the stages that do not involve trips, but instead deliberations in Montevideo, I draw on notes from my observation of meetings at the MEVIR office. My account of MEVIR’s policy implementation is skewed towards how the current administration works, but where possible, I try to point out how MEVIR has conducted these processes differently in the past.

²⁹¹ Although MEVIR’s only office is in Montevideo, around half of its field technicians (architects, social workers, and agronomists) are based in the interior. They work remotely from their laptops on days when they have no field visits. Most departments have resident at least one MEVIR technician. Montevideo-based field technicians do not have a permanent office space. They also work remotely on non-field visit days, although they often come to the central MEVIR office for meetings or errands.

TERRITORIAL INVESTIGATIONS

Before intervening in a place, MEVIR needs to decide which places to select. These choices are the result of meticulous study, rooted in the recognition that when using limited public resources, it cannot just throw money at a problem.²⁹²

While intelligence about rural housing demand has always been gathered by MEVIR, only under Frente Amplio rule was it formalized as a sector of the office with employees dedicated on a full-time basis to the task. As late as the 1990s, such investigations were still done by field technicians on days when they were not working on a plan already approved.²⁹³ Yamila Meseguez, a sociologist, leads MEVIR's research team, which is composed of several members with degrees in sociology, architecture, or social work. From 2011 to 2018, the team researched the entire country save for Montevideo and Maldonado departments.²⁹⁴ Each year, they completed a study of two or three departments, holding the objective to reveal demand for MEVIR, by using both qualitative and quantitative data. As Alejandro Plada, an architect by training and another member of the research team, explains, they brought in architecture, sociology, social work, agronomy, and political science students as interns on one-year contracts. With each department, they would divide the team in two groups, each of these groups taking a different geographic half of the department under study. After the research trips, they would

²⁹² As early as (1998), the geographer Álvaro López Gallero made this observation.

²⁹³ Interview with Álvaro Rossi, 21 Jan 2024. Rossi is a retired MEVIR agronomist, who was based mainly in Melo.

²⁹⁴ Interview with Yamila Meseguez, 4 April 2022. MEVIR has made 45 *area rural* interventions in the rural portions of Montevideo Department, which are mostly fruit and vegetable producing zones. There are no MEVIR nuclei in rural Montevideo. While it has large tracts of rural ranchland, most of Maldonado's population lives adjacent to the beach, and only seven localities in Maldonado have seen MEVIR interventions. Despite being Uruguay's third most populous department (164,300 people), Maldonado has the third fewest MEVIR interventions, ahead of only Flores (Uruguay's least populous department with only 25,050, of whom no less than 21,429 of whom live in the capital, Trinidad), and of Montevideo. Source: MEVIR – Evaluación y Monitoreo (2022).

come back to Montevideo and then discuss together the information that would go into a series of documents for MEVIR's internal use.²⁹⁵

On our drive from Montevideo to the town of San Gregorio de Polanco, a journey made to update MEVIR's research in advance of a plan (see later in this chapter), Plada adds that the consolidation of territorial investigations within MEVIR's *modus operandi* and the increasing depth and breadth of MEVIR's research was not merely a political directive resulting from an increasing valuation of academic knowledge. It also resulted from a series of factors specific to the moment and the increasing ease of access to and abundance of information. The demographic growth of the university (including increasing enrollments) simply meant more knowledge on which MEVIR could draw. And, within MEVIR's field of interest, the conceptual focus on a "*nueva ruralidad*" (see Chapter Two) also led to more studies with which MEVIR could engage. The 2008 Territorial Planning Law (also discussed in Chapter Two) and the 2009 law authorizing municipalities (discussed in the introduction) also increased the availability of territorial information in Uruguay. A non-Uruguayan factor, GoogleEarth, helped make analysis of land patterns more expeditious.²⁹⁶

The main goal of these studies of every rural locality in Uruguay is to establish a hierarchy of the quantity and severity of housing need. These studies are holistic, collecting all sorts of information from demographics to labor patterns to communications to the presence of the state. They underscore that MEVIR as a social policy is not merely concerned with the

²⁹⁵ Field notes, 8 July 2022. The Faculty of Architecture, Design, and Urbanism (FADU) of the University of the Republic—until the early 2000s, the only place one could get an architecture degree in Uruguay—places a strong emphasis on the history and theory side of the discipline. Starting in 2016, the Department of Social Work (where MEVIR social workers receive their training) of the Faculty of Social Sciences instituted a specialty diploma in Urban Studies and Territorial Interventions, in which multiple MEVIR social workers, including Treinta y Tres-based Diego Duarte and Pando-based Tania Canelas, have enrolled.

²⁹⁶ Field notes, 8 July 2022.

material artifact of one's dwelling but also that the institution takes into account many factors that go into a person's attachment to the town they call home.

Demand itself, however, is not the only variable MEVIR considers once it has completed its territorial investigations and is deciding where to build. As Meseguez highlights, MEVIR looks at how sustainable an intervention will be. This is true regarding both the financial costs of a plan and the likelihood that the participants of a plan will continue to live there. Sometimes, she remarks, building in a given locale is just is not worth it.²⁹⁷ As both Meseguez and MEVIR's planning director Cristina Sienna note moreover, there needs to be land MEVIR can build on that is both financially affordable and legally accessible.²⁹⁸ Both Meseguez and Sienna also point to the political context as a factor, namely the degree to which intendencias will be supportive of the intervention, and cooperative on logistical matters, such as supporting the pavement of new streets.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Bearing in mind the results of the territorial investigations, MEVIR's decision of where, when, what, and how much to build happens at strategic planning ("*Planificación Estratégica*") meetings. These occur every two months in the larger of MEVIR's two conference rooms, the Sala Mieres. *Planificación Estratégica* brings together different departments of MEVIR in this decision-making process. Those present at these meetings are MEVIR's president, a board member, the planning director, the general manager, the research director, the selection director, the head of construction, and MEVIR's equivalent to chief financial officer. The MEVIR board

²⁹⁷ Interview with Yamila Meseguez, 4 April 2022. Rafael Sanguinetti recalls from his time on the MEVIR board in the late 1980s, that MEVIR valued building in places where there was consistent work and where people would be more likely to stay (interview, 4 March 2022).

²⁹⁸ Interview with Yamila Meseguez, 4 April 2022; interview with Cristina Sienna, 22 March 2022.

must approve a plan before it passes from the strategic planning stage to the technical team. However, as Yamila Mesegeuz points out, this is usually a formality.²⁹⁹



Figure 13: From left to right, selection director Victoria Morena, research director Yamila Mesegeuz, and planning director Cristina Sienna discuss the boundaries of a plan in Paso Campamento, Artigas at a strategic planning meeting (photo by author, 14 June 2022).

²⁹⁹ Interview with Yamila Mesegeuz, 4 April 2022.

The geographical question of where to build regards not just in which localities to build, and on which lands within those localities to build, but it also involves the task of defining the extent of the locality in the first place. When each proposed plan comes up for discussion, the first item is usually the geographic limits of that plan, something that eventually gains confirmation after the territorial investigation update tour (see later in this chapter). Unlike socioeconomic parameters (income, for example) for participation in MEVIR, things which are standardized across the country, setting the geographical limits within which participants must be resident has no general formula. It does not necessarily correspond to municipal boundaries or even to informal geographical ones.³⁰⁰

Strategic planning meetings are a testament to the collective knowledge within MEVIR about the particularities of place in rural Uruguay. This knowledge comes from both academic study and from years of first-hand knowledge about how things work on the ground. Moreover, they show the deftness with which MEVIR acts in many different places across Uruguayan territory at any given point in time.

In order to give a sense of how these meetings work, the level of place-based detail shared, and to illustrate how MEVIR interventions are not a one-size-fits-all solution, here is my recounting of two strategic planning meetings that I attended. Two shortcomings of my fieldnotes hinder my ability to capture these meetings in full and mean that there will be gaps in my narrative. First, I was unable to write down everything that was said. Second, I did not always document which comments were made by which person. When I can attribute agency to

³⁰⁰ MEVIR makes occasional exceptions to the standardized socioeconomic parameters it sets for participant eligibility. For example, in the plan in Castillos, Rocha, discussed later in the chapter, MEVIR lowered the minimum consecutive years of residency from five to three. They did this on account of the importance of Castillos as a bedroom community for service workers at the beaches of Rocha (interview with Victoria Morena, 8 June 2022).

an individual I do. The research director (Meseguez), the planning director (Sierra), and the selection director (Morena) are usually those most involved in sharing information.

Sala Mieres, MEVIR Office, Montevideo, 26 April 2022

San Ramón (Canelones) and Chamizo (Florida)

The first plan on today's agenda is San Ramón and Chamizo, which was announced publicly to residents of the area (see later in this chapter) the week prior. Strategic Planning meetings are about more than deciding the approval of plans. They are also about how best to shepherd them into the technical stage. Yamila Meseguez begins by talking about the boundaries. She displays a draft map of these on a projector, noting that the technical team will go around to define the exact boundaries before the upcoming meeting with local leaders. This plan has the peculiarity of straddling two departments, Canelones and Florida. As Meseguez remarks, "we are drawing bird boundaries, not political ones", adding that even though Chamizo (pop. 540) is in Florida, it is tied to San Ramón (pop. 7,133) (in Canelones) more than to other towns in Florida. San Ramón and Chamizo sit several kilometers apart from each other on either side of the Santa Lucía River, connected by Ruta 6. The nucleus, set to begin construction in September, will be built in San Ramón. It is only open to families already in San Ramón, but families in Chamizo can be participants of interventions on their own land (*planta urbana* and *area rural*).

Discussion then centers on characteristics of the area that will influence how selection and planning are done. Meseguez highlights that there will be demand from small-scale dairy producers. Conaprole Plant Number 9, which makes different types of cheese, is an anchor employer in town, deriving its milk from many local producers. As with other towns located in north-central Canelones (an area known as the Santoral because most of the towns take their names from saints), San Ramón has recently become an important destination for Cuban

immigrants.³⁰¹ MEVIR's minimum residency requirement of three years in more transient places and five years in those places experiencing less mobility will make it complicated for many recently arrived Cuban families, people who meet its other requirements to be eligible for the plan. The presence of a cavalry regiment of the Uruguayan military also adds to the transiency of the area.

The history of MEVIR in the area is another requisite topic for Meseguez, Sierra, and Morena to inform their colleagues, especially the political appointments (president, general manager, and director of construction) who have not been around the institution as long. Meseguez explains that MEVIR's last intervention in San Ramón was in 2009 for Unidades Productivas, and that its last intervention in Chamizo was a nucleus in 2001.

Sierra adds that MEVIR can think about doing a second plan of homes if there is money and land, and that it is more cost effective to build a larger plan. In a recent intervention in nearby San Antonio, one plan started a couple months after the other, but they were inaugurated around the same time, consisting of around 45 homes each.

Before moving on to the next plan, the discussion concludes with the announcement of the next steps, namely that the call for participants is now online, and that sign up will take place on 10 and 11 May in San Ramón, and 12 May in Chamizo. Partnerships MEVIR holds with two schools in San Ramón are also mentioned.

Villa del Rosario and Gaetán (Lavalleja)

Next up on the agenda is another plan that deals with two localities opposite the Santa Lucía River. A fifty-kilometer drive east of San Ramón through fields settled in the nineteenth century by immigrants from the Canary Islands lies the hamlet of Villa del Rosario (pop. 149),

³⁰¹ The abundance of labor in the Conaprole plant and in poultry production centered on the towns of Santa Rosa and San Bautista drive this migration.

about half of whose housing stock is a MEVIR nucleus. Twenty-five kilometers north of Villa del Rosario sits Gaetán (pop. 49), a town whose only concentration of homes is a MEVIR nucleus. This is not an area of extensive ranching, but nor is it as densely populated as most of rural Canelones. The discussion begins with the head of construction Ariel Amen, a political appointee, reminiscing about how his grandfather had been the head of the railway station at nearby Estación Solís.

Three items emerge. These are the history of MEVIR in the area, the characteristics of the area, and how the plan will proceed. The nucleus in Gaetán was inaugurated in 2002. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, there were eight interventions of Unidades Productivas. As an indication of the low demand in Gaetán, the last time a home was up for reassignment, only two families presented themselves as candidates.³⁰² A comment is made about how Villa del Rosario has an abundance of rural schools. Victoria Morena adds that beekeeping is an important activity. The consensus offered from the research and planning teams maintains the demand for a nucleus is in Villa del Rosario, and not in Gaetán. In Gaetán, Cristina Sienna notes, the land on which to build is available, but there is not enough demand for a nucleus, likely only ten or so homes. With respect to building the nucleus in Villa del Rosario, the Intendencia of Lavalleja has been slow in getting land to MEVIR. Amen and board member Bernardino Ayala confirm that of all intendencias during the current *quinquenio*, Lavalleja has been one of the least responsive. Victoria Morena shares that the sign up will be on 19 and 20 May with one or two days for Villa del Rosario, and a single day for Gaetán. Given that available land exceeds demand, it is proposed that MEVIR do planta urbana homes both on people's own lands and on MEVIR's land.

³⁰² For more on what happens when a family vacates a MEVIR home before signing the deed, see Chapter Five.

Before moving onto the next plan, Ayala shares an anecdote about a time he was working in the area, one that deftly illustrates how time works in the more remote reaches of Uruguay's interior. In the late morning, he got a flat tire. At 12:05 PM, he arrived at the only shop that replaced tires. The owner said, "I closed at noon. Come back at four after my lunch and siesta."

Paso Campamento (Artigas)

The discussion on a possible plan in Paso Campamento (pop. 264) on Ruta 4 between Salto and Artigas exposes wider issues, ones affecting MEVIR both at a national scale and specifically in the far north. Meseguez states the last study MEVIR did of Artigas determined that in Paso Campamento, an area of poor soils with little economic activity other than extensive sheep raising, many families did not meet the minimum income requirement and thus they could not meet the monthly rent payments. Sienna adds that there has been pressure in Paso Campamento to bring in MEVIR, because MEVIR has recently built in the adjacent localities of Cuaró and Sequeira. In order for MEVIR to take care of itself, it needs to avoid allowing exceptions to the income thresholds.

Following Up on Plans

The next agenda item is not about a specific locality, but one about general strategic planning across the five-year term of the current administration. The question is raised of how to attain geographic equity in MEVIR's work across the quinquenio. Yamila Meseguez notes how her team has now studied housing need in towns of up to 15,000. The articles of the new Urgent Consideration Law (LUC) articles have expanded where MEVIR can build. Noting how Rocha and Maldonado are departments with not much MEVIR coverage, Juan Pablo Delgado, the institution's president, who has just arrived, jokes that they should do an area rural plan in Punta

del Diablo, a bohemian beach destination.³⁰³ Ayala quips that MEVIR should build in José Ignacio, a beach resort favored by jet-set types. Two different tables are presented via the projector showing the departments in which MEVIR has built and in which it will build during this quinquenio. Delgado uses a football analogy of the “*apertura*” and “*clausura*” (the two halves of a season) on how Canelones shows up in one table much higher than the other. Uruguay is not growing in population, he adds, but Canelones is. This demographic increase results because people move there from diverse sources, including Montevideo, the interior, and abroad. A couple localities in the south of the department, Joaquín Suárez and Toledo, are effectively an extension of Montevideo, and they would not fit MEVIR’s profile. When Artigas Department is raised, Delgado mentions how Bella Unión (pop. 12,200) has other housing solutions such as cooperatives, but in Cuaró (pop. 113), there is no recourse besides MEVIR. Delgado shares that he is looking at Chuy, a town in Rocha on the Brazilian border, for a plan. On account of the LUC, it is now eligible for MEVIR. He mentions the growth of informal settlements there as a catalyst. When it comes to types of people, Chuy, he says, has a bit of everything.

Puntas de Valdéz (San José)

Before closing the meeting, one more plan comes up, that of Puntas de Valdéz (pop. 1,491), some 61 kilometers northwest of Montevideo on Ruta 1. The two questions about it concern the geographic limits. First, the issue is raised of whether the *llamado* (call for participants) should include the larger nearby town of Libertad (the consensus view is it should not; otherwise the plan would become one for Libertad and not Puntas de Valdéz). Second, a discussion ensues as to whether the boundaries should include the *balneario* (a settlement

³⁰³ Later in 2022, MEVIR did build a fire station in Punta del Diablo.

adjacent to a beach) of Kiyú, and the agricultural colony of Colonia Italia, administered by the *Instituto Nacional de Colonización* (National Colonization Institute), or INC. Sienna tells all that if MEVIR includes INC colonies within the boundaries of its plans, it changes what convenios become part of the plan.

Sala Mieres, MEVIR Office, Montevideo, 14 June 2022

Ñande (Wood Construction Company for Social Housing)

The next strategic planning meeting I attend begins with an overview of Ñande (meaning “us” in Guaraní), a company that provides wood for social housing. Originating out of a Salesian-run trade school in Marconi, one of Montevideo’s poorest neighborhoods, Ñande provides a place to work for young people who struggled in high school, as well as ex-convicts looking to re-integrate into the labor market. Earlier in the year, MEVIR began working with Ñande on a pilot project of homes made from wood in the city of Rivera, on the Brazilian border. The objective of this effort was to make wood a more widespread material and technique in MEVIR’s construction, especially in the north of the country, where agroforestry is more concentrated.³⁰⁴ Ariel Amen, a native of Paso de los Toros in Tacuarembó Department, highlights how Ñande offers three elements that together do not exist on the private market: prefabricated wood modules for social housing, job training for vulnerable people, and holistic participation in the construction process in mutual aid and self-build. MEVIR also receives twenty per cent off the market price from Ñande.

³⁰⁴ There are further historical-geographical reasons why MEVIR is using Uruguay’s far north as ground zero for testing the viability of wood homes. Sebastian Ugarte, an architect for Ñande, provides historical context to MEVIR participants in an assembly during construction of wood homes in Las Flores, Rivera. In the border city of Rivera, wood has been a common building material for vernacular architecture since the 1970s, when cheap wood from Brazil (before agroforestry was prevalent in Uruguay) made it more economical to build with. Ugarte adds that one of Ñande’s goals is to reverse a stigma in Uruguay, wherein wood homes are associated with slums, precarity, and emergency housing. He attributes this in part to the fact that Spanish and Italian migrants brought little tradition of wood construction (field notes, 19 January 2024).

Paso Campamento (Artigas)

Paso Campamento is the only plan discussed in both the April and June meetings. The June meeting reveals some interesting particularities about the place. Prefacing that the *llamado* will be in July, Meseguez fills in the details. The town is in two halves. Nearer to Ruta 4 is a MEVIR plan of 22 homes. A couple hundred meters to the east is an older settlement that has been filled in with homes from the BHU, including duplexes. Meseguez and Sierra's teams have drawn the boundaries of the plan to adjoin the boundaries of the recent MEVIR plans in Sequeira, Cuaró, and Baltasar Brum. They have done this in such a way that there is no space remaining in the area that has not been covered by these interventions. Delgado notes that people in the interior still have the idea that MEVIR diffuses by radio and that boundaries will correspond to municipalities.

Meseguez explains how the older half of town, from which many potential participants for the new MEVIR plan would come, contains around 35 homes and is legally one single lot ("*un padrón solo*"). The owner comes once a month from Artigas to collect rent from all of them, even though he only charges 200 pesos (equivalent to five dollars). Delgado and Meseguez joke that this owner must be a narco because Artigas has been in the news for narcotrafficking. Delgado wants to find out if the guy really is the owner. Given the frequent dubiousness of land titles in Artigas, it is possible that he is pretending, and that people believe him. In this uncertain case, Victoria Morena asks whether MEVIR should define this as a rural informal settlement. The consensus is reached that MEVIR's next trip ("*recorrido*") to the site will need to look at the quality of these homes. Meseguez insists that this visit should also inquire whether people actually want MEVIR, as some people have little incentive to move, no matter the low quality of their home, if they are only paying 200 pesos a month. Given the distances in this part of the

country, Meseguez also mentions how it is hard to travel to mutual aid every day if you are a peon living 50 kilometers away. After Pablo Avelino, the general manager, another political appointment, reinforces the importance of defining and drawing participants from the informal settlement, Sienna concludes by reminding the group that the important business matter here and now is the approval of the boundaries.

Casupá (Florida)

Casupá (pop. 2,402), 110 kilometers up Ruta 7 from Montevideo, and 32 kilometers before Cerro Colorado, is the home to MEVIR's first *horneros*.³⁰⁵ More than any other town along Ruta 7, it marks the transition from smaller family farms to larger-scale ranches. It is also the home to a MEVIR intervention of the current administration (a stage that occurred prior to this strategic planning discussion and another stage that occurred after appear later in this chapter). At the strategic planning meeting, Delgado begins by expressing surprise at how 120 families had signed up, a seemingly large number for a town of its size. Sienna also expresses how MEVIR did not expect the high number of families who signed up for *planta urbana* and *area rural* interventions. Delgado, who often spends his weekends in the vicinity of nearby Chamizo on his family farm raising Appaloosa horses, shares how the MEVIR intervention in Casupá annoyed people in Fray Marcos (pop. 2,398), the next town south along Ruta 7. As MEVIR can never be everywhere all at once, its decisions on where to build are bound to generate some level of resentment. However, because MEVIR's mission is to reach a national scale, it will eventually come around to the town where one lives, a feature distinguishing it from things such as companies that opt to locate in certain towns *instead of* others on account of tax incentives and other draws. Some of this jealousy from *fraymarquenses* is likely due to what

³⁰⁵ In May 2024, MEVIR, the municipality of Casupá, and the Intendencia of Florida completed a rehabilitation of the first MEVIR home into a cultural center.

Yamila Meseguez points out next. Over the previous five years, MEVIR had already built 33 planta urbana homes in Casupá. The conversation shifts to comparison between Casupá and Tala (pop. 5,089), 20 kilometers south of Fray Marcos on Ruta 7, and 20 kilometers east of San Ramón on Ruta 12, one of Uruguay's few important east-west transversal roads. Tala, Delgado notes, has both area rural and nucleus homes, but no planta urbana. Hinting towards a plan to be rolled out later in the quinquenio, Delgado stresses how a nucleus in Tala will be important, but planta urbana homes will have equal weight. Lots of *talenses* own their own land, and land use in Tala has been rather ordered and compact without much sprawl. Gastón Diz, MEVIR's equivalent of a chief financial officer, who is present largely to listen rather than talk, cannot help but crack a joke about a colleague from Tala with a penchant for eating, "In Tala, the hot dog cart owner moves the economy. He has two estancias."

Montes (Canelones)

An exchange about the next place on the agenda reveals another example of how MEVIR has limits to set, in this case social, rather than geographic or economic. Montes (pop. 1,760), on the eastern edge of Canelones is an unusual site of deindustrialization in rural Uruguay. From 1944 to 1988, Montes was home to a factory of *Remolacheras Azucareras del Uruguay Sociedad Anónima* (Sugar Beet Mills of Uruguay Limited Liability Company), or RAUSA.³⁰⁶ Since the plant's closure, the town has suffered considerable decline. One result of the plant was the creation in the mid-twentieth century of a new neighborhood opposite the railway station (also decommissioned around the same time as RAUSA) where much of the influx of workers lived. Cristina Sierra reads off a list of families in this neighborhood, in order to illustrate the complexity of the social work with which MEVIR is dealing. She gives the example of a woman,

³⁰⁶ Azucarlito, another Uruguayan beet sugar manufacturer, continues production today at its plant in Paysandú.

whose mother is a MEVIR participant, and who is married to the former partner of her mother. In truth and jest, Delgado asks whether this is a matter for MEVIR or for the MIDES, inquiring whether a MEVIR home will solve more deeply rooted psychological issues. This in turn leads to a debate about how much of a subsidy families will receive in the plan.

Independencia (Florida)

Independencia (pop. 396) is a small town built on either side of a railway station in the dairy belt of southwestern Florida. Around a half of its inhabitants reside in MEVIR homes. In the current quinquenio, Independencia has the distinction of hosting back-to-back plans. The meeting's discussion of the town begins by confirming the first plan will be inaugurated in late July or early August, and that the subsequent nucleus will begin the pre-construction stage later in the year. A comment is made how it will be good for political purposes to inaugurate the second plan in early 2024. Delgado highlights how residents of the area want MEVIR to have continuity. They greatly enjoy the institution's presence in the pueblo and the sight of the MEVIR construction shed. Delgado mentions the possibility of refurbishing the abandoned "*casona de AFE*" (the former home of the railway station head), into a cultural center as a part of MEVIR's work in Independencia. Since Independencia does not have its own municipality, Delgado talked directly to Florida's intendente, Guillermo López.

Minas de Corrales (Riviera)

In a country where no more than 0.1 percent of GDP comes from mining, Minas de Corrales (pop 3,788), stands out. Some 95 kilometers south of the city of Riviera (and, thus, the Brazilian border), Minas de Corrales was founded in 1878 by a French company seeking to mine gold in the area. Mining continued there until 1939, and resumed in the 2000s, attracting workers from nearby towns. The social, historical, and labor characteristics of the area are not on today's

docket, but Renata Coppetti, MEVIR's deputy director of construction (not a political appointment), does mention however how the area is so extensive that it takes the technical team forever to cover the area for a current plan with lots of *area rural* homes. This contrasts, she notes, with many plans in the more densely-populated south, where technical teams can visit many more area rural participants over the course of a workday.

Water Issues

One of the public bodies with which MEVIR needs to interact most closely is the *Obras Sanitarias del Estado* (Sanitary State Works), or OSE, Uruguay's national water utilities company.³⁰⁷ Delgado announces that OSE is short on money this year. Diz notes that there are tradeoffs to be made between power and water. Coppetti critiques OSE for not prioritizing its osmosis plant. A MEVIR plan in Campana, Colonia, is being delayed as MEVIR waits for OSE to improve the water quality to a level MEVIR expects.³⁰⁸

Planning Future Nuclei in the Quinquenio

The remainder of the meeting is about planning future nuclei for the rest of the quinquenio. Interventions have to be "under study" before they are "approved". Sienna runs down a list of interventions currently under study. She has taken Chapicuy, Paysandú Department out of planning, because the INC has not responded to her about land. Since MEVIR does not have its own land there and is struggling to find any at a suitable price, Sienna decides that it would be an inefficient use of resources to do only *planta urbana* and *area rural* homes. Delgado adds that Daniel García Trovero had warned him about the INC's slowness.

³⁰⁷ OSE would be in the news around a year later, as Montevideo suffered from a lack of potable drinking water for nearly a month, a previously unheard-of crisis in Uruguay.

³⁰⁸ The plan would proceed almost two years later. Interview with Yamila Meseguez, 4 April 2022; Notes from field visit to Ombues de Lavalle and Campana, 28 March 2022.

MEVIR also wants to build in Ecilda Paullier, San José Department, a town with lots of demand. However, it has not yet obtained any land, which is prohibitively expensive in this prosperous part of the country. Unlike Chapicuy, however, MEVIR will go ahead and do a plan of *planta urbana* and *area rural* homes.

In Masoller, on the triple border of Rivera, Artigas, and Salto (and a disputed frontier with Brazil), MEVIR has land and potable water.

In Palmitas, Soriano, MEVIR has land, but the problem is water. As Sienna announces, if the intendencia is in charge and builds a well, it is easier for MEVIR to proceed. Delgado says to tell the Intendencia of Soriano that if they do the water (through the OSE), MEVIR will go to Palmitas.

Meseguez brings up that there is lots of demand in Velázquez, Rocha Department. In this case, the demand is evident. This comes not just from her studies, but because in a recent reassignment of an abandoned home, lots of people signed up.

Delgado volunteers that in Cerrillos, Canelones, MEVIR has a very big plot of land.

Bernabé Rivera in Artigas, and Cerro Colorado in Flores (not the place carrying the same name located in Florida) are also on MEVIR's radar for the quinquenio.

Following these putative projects, Sienna shares a list of ten plans for which *llamados* will be released between July and December. Sienna and Amen once again criticize the current Intendencia of Lavalleja, a department not included in any of these ten plans.

When concluding the meeting, Meseguez brings up the key point that many people in MEVIR's target population erroneously think that if the technical team visited your family, you are already signed up for the MEVIR plan. Victoria Morena echoes earlier sentiments that MEVIR does not want to cause commotion by making exceptions to rules. MEVIR's repeated

contact with place has much to do with dispelling misinformation between the institution and potential participants.

LAND ACQUISITION

Before I proceed to the next stage where MEVIR technicians conduct field outings, I would like to add some additional context about MEVIR's acquisition and regularization of land, points that did not emerge clearly in the two strategic planning meetings discussed above.

Land represents around a quarter of the total cost of a MEVIR nucleus. In the south of the country, land is more expensive, but it is also more regularized. In the north, not only are titles often dubious, but Rivera and Artigas are the two departments that still have not zoned all their lands, with Rivera preferring to zone its lands at the level of the municipio. This complicates, as Cristina Sienna tells me, certain MEVIR plans.³⁰⁹

Sienna leads a Land Commission separate from the strategic and operational planning meetings. It works specifically on the matter of acquiring and regularizing lands. MEVIR's GIS database is instrumental in these efforts. Given Victoria Morena's claim that obtaining land for nuclei requires local knowledge, it is no surprise that the MEVIR president holds frequent meetings with *alcaldes* around the country.³¹⁰ One of Sienna's tasks is to convert land from rural to urban before construction starts, a process that is sometimes rushed on account of political concerns. Often this entails an informal political agreement, but MEVIR always procures some form of written documentation, even if it is no more than an email.³¹¹

³⁰⁹ Interview with Cristina Sienna, 22 March 2022.

³¹⁰ Interview with Victoria Morena, 8 June 2022.

³¹¹ Interview with Cristina Sienna, 22 March 2022.

THE TERRITORIAL INVESTIGATION UPDATE TOUR

The territorial investigation update tour (“*gira de actualización territorial*”) is arguably the clearest example of how MEVIR takes seriously breadth and depth of place knowledge. The tour happens after a plan is approved internally in MEVIR, but before it is announced publicly.³¹² MEVIR has five main objectives to the tour: updating knowledge about the location, detecting and predicting the amount of housing demand before families sign up, delineating the geographical boundaries of the plan, deciding on what media will best disseminate the plan, and giving the technical team all of the updated information before going on site. The team that goes on these outings consists of an agronomist, a social worker, and Yamila Meseguez (or one of her colleagues in the research group). While on site, the team visits “*referentes del pueblo*”, important and knowledgeable people in the town. These are often employees of schools, municipalities, and policlinics. Some of the questions MEVIR poses to everybody concerned. Other questions are only asked depending on the occupation of an informant. The result of the *jornada* (a word that cleverly combines the meanings of “workday” and “daytrip”) is a quickly-drafted *pauta de relevamiento*, or field survey. This later becomes more widely shared with MEVIR technicians, in advance of the ensuing steps leading to construction.

San Gregorio de Polanco (Tacuarembó), 8 July 2022

On a Thursday afternoon, while walking through Montevideo’s Parque Rodó, I receive a WhatsApp message from Yamila Meseguez that tomorrow is the update tour in San Gregorio de Polanco, a town I have long wanted to visit on account of its many open-air murals. One of her research team colleagues, Alejandro Plada, will leave from a parking garage a block from the MEVIR office at 5 AM, and there is room in the car. Would I like to go?

³¹² The information in this paragraph derives from my interview with Yamila Meseguez, 4 April 2022.

Cabs in Parque Rodó (the neighborhood adjacent to the eponymous park, and where I make my base in Montevideo) are not hard to catch during the small hours of Friday morning, as the many nearby *boliches* (nightclubs) are still hopping. After I alight from the cab at the parking garage, the *tachero* (taxi driver) waits for a bit. He is looking in my general direction as I wait for Plada. Confused by his choice to gaze rather than continue onward in search of passengers, I tell him that I am waiting for a colleague. “I’m just admiring the jackets”, he says. Unbeknownst to me in my bleary-eyed state, I had positioned myself in front of a clothing store.

As Plada and I make our way out of a Montevideo with little traffic northbound on Ruta 5, I take as many notes as I can from our conversation. Holding me back is the inconsistent illumination of the road. When it is too dark, my handwriting slips into incomprehension.

Plada, a Montevideo native, started at MEVIR in 2010 and earned his architecture degree the year after. When he arrived at MEVIR he was surprised at how much of a “*gran familia*” (big family) the organization is, and at how much professionalism he saw amongst the technicians. He highlights to me how MEVIR works to do the best work possible, something that makes it stand out compared to other state bodies, ones content with doing the minimum. He takes advantage of MEVIR’s shorter working hours to work three hours a day in Plan Juntos. This is a program started by José Mujica’s government in the second of three Frente Amplio terms (2010-2015), and it works with families in vulnerable housing situations.

Between Montevideo and a breakfast stop at an ANCAP service station in Florida, Plada shares some insightful and amusing reflections on his experiences from doing these tours. MEVIR’s prestige in the interior opens doors, Plada claims. He has been to meetings with intendencias, where people remark that MEVIR’s intelligence on *Uruguay profundo* is even

better than their own.³¹³ He attributes this to the fact that decentralization is MEVIR's fundamental mission. Describing MEVIR's work in Uruguay profundo, Plada likens many of the places where MEVIR intervenes to the "black holes" of the country. These are the places that are forgotten by other institutions and by many (though not all) processes of modernity.

One such black hole Plada visited was La Alegría, Durazno. It is located near the end of an abandoned railway, one that terminates abruptly at the Río Negro (long a barrier between north-south communications in Uruguay), and was a line that had never serviced any significant population centers. Contrary to its name, which means "joy", Plada found La Alegría to be the saddest place he has yet visited with MEVIR. In another remote area, Plada recalls the experience of a social worker colleague who conducted visits in rural Rivera, and was driving in search of a house where she had an interview scheduled. She followed what she thought were the directions of a *vecino* (the word means neighbor, but also refers to someone from an area you are visiting). Thirty minutes later, she asked another *vecino* for directions and he responded in Portuguese. It turns out she had unwittingly landed in Brazil!

MEVIR's drawing of plan boundaries is a key instrument for filling in black holes in the map. As Plada comments, were MEVIR to delineate the parameters of plan (noting that is the area within which prospective residents live and or work) by calculating the radius from the site of a planned nucleus or the center of a town, this would leave out important nooks and crannies, and it would not always respect how people actually experience the area. Plada also notes the importance of territorial dynamics at the level of the department when conducting these tours.

³¹³ *Uruguay profundo* ("deep Uruguay") is largely contiguous with the areas that MEVIR services. It can be loosely defined as everywhere that is not the Montevideo metropolitan area, beaches, and departmental capitals. Uruguay profundo is more clearly defined by what it is not rather than by what it is. This tells us how entrenched monocephaly is in Uruguay at the national and departmental scales. MEVIR's continued presence has arguably done more than any institution to define what and where Uruguay profundo constitutes.

This comes into play when thinking about issues such as access to secondary education, bus services, and job opportunities. For example, Salto Department lacks intermediate-sized cities, going from Salto, the capital, with 104,028 people to Constitución, the second largest town with 2,762. As with Salto the capital, Constitución is also located along the Uruguay River in the extreme western end of the department. Paysandú Department has at least Guichón (pop. 5,039) as a somewhat central place, one with more services, situated in the interior of the department.

Plada and I cross the Yí River and reach Durazno, where we pick up Trinidad-based MEVIR social worker Margarita Lasarte. The sun rises and the frost begins to melt after we pass Uruguay's only Air Force base located outside of the Montevideo area. Writing on the building exclaims, "*Aviación Vanguardia de la Patria*" (Aviation, Vanguard of the Nation). The topic of conversation switches to our destination, San Gregorio de Polanco, the objectives for MEVIR on this day, and to reminiscences about past MEVIR jornadas.

San Gregorio de Polanco (pop. 3,415) is located on the northern bank of a portion of the Río Negro that was turned into the Rincón del Bonete reservoir. It is the nearest settlement of significance to the geographic center of Uruguay. Unlike almost all the other places where MEVIR works, tourism is a significant part of the local economy. Bathers are drawn to the freshwater beaches during the summer, and art lovers go out of their way to view the more than seventy murals that have been painted by professional artists since a local initiative to turn the town into an open-air museum was spawned in 1993.³¹⁴

Plada discusses how San Gregorio is more than a *balneario*. It also serves as the center for a wider area, especially given how few towns of any size are located nearby. He mentions how the lowering of the water level due to drought the previous summer had hurt the tourism

³¹⁴ San Gregorio is especially attractive to people in Tacuarembó and Rivera as a closer and cheaper freshwater alternative to Uruguay's Atlantic beaches.

sector. Drawing on his knowledge from his other employer, he praises the architectural quality of some homes recently built by Plan Juntos in San Gregorio, but criticizes how they were built in a neighborhood with few services. The biggest news in town is arguably that work on a bridge is underway. When finished, this will eliminate the need to cross the Río Negro by *balsa* (raft ferry).³¹⁵

Based in her hometown of Trinidad, Margarita Lasarte has worked in MEVIR for 35 years. She was hired in the late 1980s, at a time when MEVIR rapidly increased its roster of social workers, including Teresa Sangiovanni, and Paysandú-based Beatriz Sampayo. She found out about MEVIR through working in the high school in Ismael Cortinas (pop. 918), at the quadruple border of Flores, Soriano, Colonia, and San José Departments. Lasarte previews some of the day's activities, underlining how seriously MEVIR takes the relationship between service provider and recipient as well as between itself and the other institutions that mediate this relationship. "People with housing needs very easily get false hope, and one of MEVIR's tasks is to be realistic with them", she says. Discussing meetings with the *referentes locales* we have today, she explains that sometimes the most productive meetings are the individual ones. Collective meetings, ones held with a range of actors, can sometimes take away the voices of the people with the most knowledge. This argument holds, especially if those people are timid, a

³¹⁵ The bridge does not, however, significantly lower travel times to Montevideo. There is a wider discussion to be had about the extent to which Uruguayans have viewed the Río Negro as an obstacle rather than an asset. The San Gregorio bridge was inaugurated on 12 May 2023. Around the same time, another *balsa* in Uruguay profundo became obsolete with the inauguration of a further bridge, one that connects La Charqueada (Treinta y Tres) with Cebollati (Rocha), two towns with a significant MEVIR presence. At the 2024 National Festival of Chickens and Hens in San Bautista (Canelones), I was introduced to the *alcalde* of Cebollati. I asked her what the biggest benefit of the bridge has been? Rather than economic growth, to my surprise, she mentioned public health. Residents of Cebollati were now less than an hour from the nearest hospital (in Treinta y Tres), rather than over two hours (in Rocha). She noted how at least one life had been saved because of this improvement in hospital access. The *balsa* had not run on a set schedule, moving to cross only when it had enough cars. I can assume that for people in the northern reaches of Durazno, such as La Alegría, the bridge will have a similar impact, as it quickens their access to health services in San Gregorio.

personality trait common among men in rural Uruguay. At the end of the jornada, it would become clear to me why MEVIR held many separate meetings at this stage, rather than convening an open house or giant round table gathering (as it would at the two subsequent stages). Trust is paramount.

As we pass MEVIR plans along Ruta 5, Lasarte can recall with precision who the architect, social worker, and agronomist were for these projects. She makes the interesting point that because she has no children, in contrast with most of her social worker colleagues, it is harder for her to remember the dates of MEVIR events, which others associate with the age of their children. Given her base in centrally-located Trinidad, she has worked across wider swaths of the country than some of her peers who are more restricted to either the south or the north. Her accumulated experience also means she carries an exceptional recall of MEVIR participants. She notes that she may not remember the name of a participant from long ago, but she will remember their situation. This arose later in the day. Regarding her colleagues, “I adapt to the technicians I work with”, says Lasarte, with the exception of one architect with whom she worked around 2005 in Cuchilla del Perdido in Soriano. He thought that MEVIR would let him do what he wanted and he talked without listening to his colleagues and participants. This particular architect did not last long in MEVIR. Lasarte tells me an anecdote from a similar time that has not yet come up in other interviews. When Sebastián Beltrame took over as MEVIR president upon the arrival of Frente Amplio rule, he decided not to let technicians who also worked in intendencias work on MEVIR plans located within their own departments. This decision corroborates Beltrame’s intention to limit the influence of the National Party on MEVIR through the elimination of local commissions. This change personally impacted Lasarte. In addition to working for MEVIR, she has long filled in as a social worker for the Intendencia of Flores.

When we pass Peralta (pop. 218), a town comprised of mostly MEVIR homes, Lasarte reminisces about working on a plan there seven years ago, and how only three or so families signed up for area rural homes. She refers with affection to the agronomist of the plan, who everyone calls “Coto”, a man she describes as hard working, with an amazing analytical capacity, and unafraid to speak his mind.

As the outing to San Gregorio would demonstrate, MEVIR *jornadas* are often extremely and unexpectedly long affairs. They finish when the work is done, not when it is time to clock out. Lasarte tells the story of an exasperating outing in Vichadero, Rivera, where *se armó lío* (a common Southern Cone expression to describe the outbreak of some kind of trouble) in the MEVIR *salón comunal* (event hall). She ended up being in a meeting from 7 to 11 PM and had to stay the night with a colleague.

About quarter after nine, we finally turn right off Ruta 5 at kilometer marker 306, entering Ruta 43 and what was, until the bridge, the only road leading to San Gregorio. Ten kilometers later, we arrive in Achar (pop. 687), a town with 116 homes in MEVIR nuclei, the most recent of them inaugurated in 2014. Lasarte worked on one of these plans. She recalls how once at an assembly of participants the rain was so torrential that it was impossible to hear, on account of the roof being made of metal. At an inauguration in Achar, Lasarte’s mother called to tell her that her 103-year old grandmother had died. The Intendente of Tacuarembó, Eber da Rosa, who was going to Montevideo after the event, drove her back to Trinidad with his driver.

In Achar, we pick up the agronomist on today’s team, María Delia Núñez, who has arrived by bus. Núñez is originally from Tacuarembó, but lives she in Vichadero. This her husband’s hometown, where she also serves as the principal of the local high school. Given the logistics of picking up Núñez, Plada remarks how the lack of public transportation connections

between places in the interior which are not located along a Montevideo axis further ties people to Montevideo. Twenty some minutes later, we reach a roundabout. Were we to turn left onto Ruta 59, we would eventually reach Clara (pop. 160), a settlement that Plada notes does not have MEVIR. Discussion turns to the subject of demand for area rural homes in the San Gregorio plan. In order to gauge this demand, we first need to find out what areas rurales exist. There is also debate about whether to extend the llamado to Achar, because there is proven demand there. However, that brings up a series of complicated questions about how much to include Achar, where to draw the boundaries, and for what purposes? It is notable that San Gregorio (before this current plan), has fewer MEVIR homes (97) than Achar despite its being much larger, and it has not seen MEVIR return since the mid-2000s.³¹⁶

Territorial investigation update tours involve a considerable amount of preparation. The packed schedule is the result of coordinating and preparing meetings with local actors. Núñez stresses how phone calls beforehand are important in the acquisition of information and for the development of relationships built on trust. She gives the example of some information she gained yesterday by calling ahead to an informant: there are rumors of domestic violence among local fishermen.

Our first stop takes me to one of several hamlets in different parts of the country that share its name with the town I know best, Cerro Chato. We park at Rural School number 60, sandwiched between agroforestry plantations and open pastures. In the schoolyard, livestock are grazing.³¹⁷ The first two weeks of July are winter vacation in Uruguay, so classes are not in session.

³¹⁶ San Gregorio's two previous nuclei were built in 1982 and 2005.

³¹⁷ The numbering system for rural schools begins anew for each department. Thus, this school is rural school number 60 for Tacuarembó.

Akin to one-room schoolhouses, *escuelas rurales* in Uruguay generally have one teacher serving all students from the first through to the sixth grades. At Escuela Rural 60, this *maestra* is Lourdes, who has been at the school since 2009. She is also serving as the deputy mayor (*alcalde suplente*) of San Gregorio de Polanco. She announces this weekend there will be a *truco* and *conga* (two types of card playing games) tournament in Cerro Chato, and that in La Paloma, situated some 35 kilometers away, on the Durazno side of the river, there will be a *raid* (competitive long-distance horse race). Of the four people we meet with in the school, Lourdes, with blue eyes, black zip-up platform boots, and a grey shawl covering her white teacher's tunic, is clearly the most active and energetic. Throughout the hour or so we are together, her body language reveals how happy she is to be interviewed (later in the car, we agree that she seems much more like an *alcalde* than the actual one). Accompanying Lourdes is the actual *alcalde* of San Gregorio de Polanco, Asdrúbal, who is also an employee of the ASSE, Karina, the *auxiliar* (a school employee who does non-teaching duties), and Gisele, a *vecina*, president of the local Comisión de Fomento, and referente of *paraje* Rolón, on the other side of Ruta 43.³¹⁸ The four of them pass around a gourd of mate. Karina, who adds that the sheep grazing in front of the school are hers, gets up occasionally to tend to “*un buen puchero calentito*” (*puchero* is a stew commonly served in the winter in Uruguay and Argentina). Before the meeting begins in earnest, we greet several children who are watching a movie in the next room over. This room is serving as a de facto day care during the school recess. Lasarte compliments the staff on how orderly the children are. Plada exclaims how good it is to have sun this morning as rain complicates these *jornadas*.

³¹⁸ *Paraje* is a term for a rural area with some population but without services.



Figure 14: The architect Alejandro Plada (with his hand on the map) and the social worker Margarita Lasarte (to his left) interview local actors at Rural School # 60 in Cerro Chato, Tacuarembó Department. Only after forty-five minutes do the MEVIR technicians begin to ask about housing (photo by author, 8 July 2022).

Plada then explains to the four what we are doing. He shares how he has a spreadsheet that helps him decide which interviews to do in person today, and which ones to do on the phone. Throughout the interview Plada asks most of the questions, as Lasarte and Núñez frantically take down notes. The rationale behind this is that with two people taking notes, you are more likely to catch information that could otherwise be missed.³¹⁹ On a sheet of paper, there is a systematic list of questions that they ask. In a blank space at the bottom, they fill in the answers. Plada and Lasarte use pen and paper, while Núñez uses a computer. The rapidity of this exchange comes at

³¹⁹ My own notes for this exchange are incomplete for the same reason. In some cases, I wrote down the question but not the answer, or vice versa. Nevertheless, the objective of the interview and how it fits in the overall picture of MEVIR should be clear from my account.

a pace foreign to the languid interior. However, the local *referentes* understand full well that we came a long distance and have a packed agenda.

Lourdes starts out by beaming, “*MEVIR es sinónimo de la alegría. MEVIR venir es alegría para nosotros*” (MEVIR is synonymous with joy. MEVIR coming is joy for us.) At some point, she and Asdrúbal reference that they are meeting with Juan Pablo Delgado next week in Montevideo about the land for the plan. The other people we interview throughout the day are not privy to this information, because it is confidential until publicly announced.

Throughout the interview, it is sometimes hard to distinguish what they are saying about San Gregorio in general as opposed to specific discussions about the smaller *parajes*. Plada asks Gisele what traits Rolón shows. She replies that there are lots of *ranchitos* (humble dwellings) which are not sitting on formalized property. Four or five families are living in really bad conditions. Among the men, some work in *changas* (odd jobs), others are ranch peons. One woman works in a school, but the rest are housewives. Plada also asks where people go when they need services?

A map of the boundaries of the current plan sits front and center on a table between the MEVIR technicians and the four local *referentes*. Plada announces that MEVIR is trying to move toward functional regions more than administrative regions, asking the *alcalde* how he would define the boundaries. “What *parajes* would be included as part of the San Gregorio area?”, Plada inquires.

Plada asks about Blanquillos (not to be confused with the town of Blanquillo on the Durazno side of the river where MEVIR had just finished a plan), a part of Paso Hondo, a locality he learned about through a 1971 military geography report. Asdrúbal responds that

Blanquillos “*casi no existe*” (almost doesn’t exist) and that there are only three families living there.

Lourdes interjects by sharing some important characteristics of Cerro Chato. It is very dispersed, she says, and has about 22 families. Once a month, a doctor comes to the polyclinic. There is a clear division between Cerro Chato and Cañada del Estado (where we are headed to next), a paraje farther off Ruta 43. When people in Cerro Chato go somewhere other than San Gregorio (thirteen kilometers away), it is to Tacuarembó (pop. 54,757), the departmental capital, which lies 127 kilometers away the other direction. Curtina, which is on Ruta 5 before Tacuarembó, does not even have a gas station (there is one in Achar). It is only a hundred kilometers to Paso de los Toros (pop. 12,985) if you turn south on Ruta 5, but it has a lot fewer services than Tacuarembó.

Plada asks about other problems, such as the cost of travel, which Lourdes says is expensive for locals. She explains how the bus timetables are designed for you to conduct *trámites* (a word that combines the meanings of “errand”, “procedure”, and “paperwork”) in Tacuarembó, and that there are five round-trips to the departmental capital per day. Núñez asks Lourdes to slow down so that she can note the precise times of the buses. Earlier in the car, the MEVIR team discussed how they prefer not to record these interviews, because it is unwieldy and less organic (the same method I preferred to use throughout my research for this project). Lourdes continues that there are three buses per day to and from Montevideo, all run by the company Turismar. Some people have their bus tickets subsidized, for example, students receive a round trip per month to Montevideo, two monthly to Tacuarembó and two to Rivera. The company Posadas operates a direct line from San Gregorio to Rivera, but locals using this service almost always alight in Tacuarembó.

Plada moves onto the question of specific territorial changes since the original investigation. As is typical of the dynamics of the “nueva ruralidad” I discussed at the end of Chapter Two, enrollment at Escuela 60 has declined from eighteen students in 2010 to only four today. And two of those four students present are only there because their parents are working in the area temporarily. Lourdes pins this decline on multiple factors. It is a result not just of emigration, but it also reflects how rural birth rates have lowered. There are simply few young families.

Plada asks if there are any identity traits that stand out about the area. Asdrúbal explains that there are few sources of work in San Gregorio, although some people did move here to work on the installation of a new cellulose plant in Paso de los Toros. Lourdes concurs that there is less and less work available in the area. Even the state, the lynchpin of employment in small Uruguayan towns, is not immune. The UTE has closed its offices in San Gregorio. And Asdrúbal adds that the BROU is only open on a Monday, Wednesday, and Friday basis.

Plada inquires about water. “Where are the wells?”, he asks. “*Tenemos pozo propio*” (We have our own well) is the answer.

The next set of questions involves local organizations, commissions, meeting halls, and clubs; the spaces for gathering beyond the domestic sphere, the state, or the private sector. Lourdes remarks that neither MEVIR plan in San Gregorio has a *salón communal*. There are four *baby fútbol* teams, and social life in town revolves around them.³²⁰ Each of the teams has its own headquarters and canteen. Sports are very strong in San Gregorio. In addition to soccer, there is a

³²⁰ Organized competitive youth soccer in Uruguay, is commonly referred to as *baby fútbol*. This is because the *Organización Nacional de Fútbol Infantil* (National Organization of Youth Soccer), or ONFI, was known until 2000 as the *Comisión Nacional de Baby Fútbol*. The ONFI, like MEVIR, is a public institution founded in the late 1960s, that has had a significant social impact across national territory. It has played a major role in the production of Uruguayan soccer talent for export to leading clubs around the world.

nautical club, basketball court, and an open-air municipal pool. The president of the Uruguayan Football Association (AUF) will be in town next week as part of the preparations for the 2030 World Cup joint bid with Argentina, Paraguay, and Chile. The Hotel Municipal is run by the *intendencia*. San Gregorio has a Rotary club, a Lions club, PRISMA (a local non-profit that works with disabled children), and a non-profit called *Expresarte*, which oversees the open-air museum. In Cerro Chato, there is a *sociedad criolla* that participates in the *Patria Gaucha* festival, held every March in Tacuarembó and exhibiting traditional rural activities.

Plada asks about social problems. Lourdes volunteers that Cerro Chato “*es un mundo aparte*” (is a separate world). Since it is so dispersed, problems have a harder time reaching here. In Cañada del Estado, there are more family problems. “You can ask the *maestra* there”, she says. In San Gregorio, drugs have become an issue over the last two to three years, and people have been prosecuted on account of them. Because of the murals, there is not a graffiti problem (something omnipresent in Montevideo), but there are other kinds of vandalism.

The next topic is employment. Asdrúbal says that most employment is in the public sector. There are 55 employees in the municipality, and eight temporary workers for MIDES. The municipality is by far the biggest employer. More than twenty people from San Gregorio are also working on the bridge construction. Lots of people from San Gregorio went to work on building the UPM cellulose plant in Paso de los Toros, inaugurated the following June. San Gregorio has three *barracas* (akin to general stores), two pharmacies, two supermarkets, a handful of family *almacenes* (small stores), branches of the UTE, the OSE, and a hospital.³²¹ Around eight to ten people work at the ANCAP gas station. A number of families work on ranches and in other rural establishments. Asdrúbal remarks that the municipality has not received specific complaints

³²¹ Asdrúbal’s mention of the UTE contradicts Lourdes’s earlier comment.

about lack of work, but that people do come asking for jobs. Lourdes concurs with him. What people in San Gregorio want most is housing and work. Seasonality presents its own challenges. The hospitality capacity in San Gregorio is 1,500 beds. Lourdes expresses that a convention center would be helpful to attract other types of tourism. “We need things to do outside of summer,” she says.³²² In the first two weeks of January, San Gregorio triples in population. There are fewer tourists in February, though still significant numbers. Rural employment in the area also suffers from a lack of diversification. Agroforestry has replaced soybeans as the second commercial activity after ranching (mixed cattle and sheep). There is not yet a third *rubro* (sector). There are two forestry companies working in the area, but all the primary material ends up at the UPM cellulose plant in Fray Bentos. They come with their own employees and provide very little labor locally.

The discussion returns to education. The kids at Escuela 60 come from up to 12 kilometers away. When students finish sixth grade, they go to high school in San Gregorio. More than eighty percent complete the *ciclo básico* (grades 7-9), and around half complete their *bachillerato* (grades 10-12). Even with a new dormitory in Tacuarembó for tertiary education students (UdelaR has a regional center in Tacuarembó), children from San Gregorio struggle when they arrive in higher education. Only about five to six people from the town graduate from university each year.

Some forty-five minutes into the interview, Plada finally asks about housing. The trajectory of this conversation is indicative of MEVIR being “more than a home”, an institution that serves as a holistic rural development project. Asdrúbal notes that there are not many

³²² Facilities like convention centers are noticeably lacking in the interior of a country where important national meetings tend to happen in Montevideo. The small market of Uruguay also limits the scale of national conventions in the first place.

extreme cases of houses, maybe somewhere in the range from ten to twenty, in San Gregorio that need tearing down. A lot of families *amontonar* (crowd together) because they cannot expand their homes, given the fact they are not property owners.³²³ Far more families than these extreme cases have a need to become owners or to improve their homes, says Asdrúbal. He estimates that around a hundred families in the area have a need for a home in a MEVIR nucleus. Plada asks where these families currently live? Asdrúbal responds that around seventy percent of them live “*agregado*” with family members, and around thirty percent of them rent. Lourdes adds there are very few houses to rent in San Gregorio (in part a result of the seasonal rental market for tourism), and that incomes are very low with respect to rent. In Cerro Chato, there are around five families with land title issues. Referring to MEVIR’s work beyond housing, she adds that there are always families interested in wells. A man with the surname Méndez borrows water from his neighbor and would be a candidate for such an intervention.

After Plada has run through all the questions, Lourdes asks with a laugh if we have any “extraofficial” information. Plada responds that this survey is about looking both at the necessity for and potential of a plan.

The next interview focuses more on the *paraje* than on San Gregorio as a whole. We bid farewell to Lourdes, Asdrúbal, Karina, and Gisele, and make our way a few kilometers down a dirt road to another rural school, Escuela Rural 24 Cañada del Estado. The only sign pointing to the place is handwritten on a piece of wood. The school building is one of those built by the Artigas Bicentenary Commission that Alberto Gallinal led in the early 1960s. This becomes clear immediately on account of the presence of the rounded brick vaults, which are typical of the

³²³ The verb *amontonar* was used by Uruguayan singer-songwriter José “El Sabalero” Carbajal in “*Yacomienza*” a song about poverty in the Montevideo neighborhoods Barrio Sur and Palermo.

architect Eladio Dieste.³²⁴ The reach of the Uruguayan state to remote areas through rural schools is both material and symbolic. In front of the building lies a bust of a serious looking José Artigas and the national flag waving on a pole. On the building itself is the national seal, one which stresses both the country's urban and rural foundations.

Three referents are here to meet us. Delia is the maestra. She comes every workday from Tacuarembó.³²⁵ Magdalena is the auxiliar. Fidgety and timid, she arrives in a small white Volkswagen pick-up. Patricia is a vecina, whose parents are from here. She has lived here the last nineteen years. She arrives by motorcycle.

Once we are seated, they serve us coffee and *biscochos*, apologizing that the *biscochos* are not homemade.³²⁶ Above the whiteboard behind Plada and Lasarte is a portrait of José Pedro Varela (1845-1879), the architect of Uruguay's free, secular, and public school system. After laying down the map of the llamado, Plada asks what separates Cañada del Estado from Cerro Chato. The answer is a road they call Camino de Carpintería. There are sixty inhabitants in Cañada del Estado. Plada asks how many families there? Patricia starts counting with her fingers and naming them. Seventeen, she concludes. "What a census!", Plada responds. Population has dropped a lot.³²⁷ Patricia's father is one of fourteen siblings. Her mother is one of eleven. "*Las familias se fueron vendiendo*" (The families were sold off), she reflects on declining birth rates. "*Un cambio total en la zona. No hay niños*" (A total change in the area. There are no kids). This year, there are only five pupils enrolled.

³²⁴ When I ask the *maestra* about what it means to work in a Dieste-designed school of historical-architectural significance, she says that they are allowed to make modifications inside, but not to the structure itself.

³²⁵ Many *maestros rurales* live on the school grounds during the week, sometimes with their family.

³²⁶ The word *biscocho* in Uruguay refers to sweet or savory buttery flaky mini pastries. *Biscochos* are extremely common in any kind of social or work gathering that does not occur at a regular mealtime. In Argentina, they are known as *facturas*, and tend to be somewhat larger in size.

³²⁷ While MEVIR serves as a brake on rural-to-urban migration, it does not build anywhere near so quickly enough as to stop altogether rural population loss, all other factors held equal.

A doctor comes once a month from San Gregorio, bringing a nurse, but there is no resident nurse. Patricia helps to volunteer at the clinic.

The wooden bus shelter with a metal covering at the turn into the school is for a bus to take students to the high school in San Gregorio. It has been there for eight years and there are concerns about its darkness during the evenings and early mornings. The Intendencia of Tacuarembó pays for the bus. People here either use their own vehicles (a motorcycle for example) or walk the five kilometers to Ruta 43. They often leave their vehicles at Cañada del Estado's one almacén, then take a bus the fifteen or so minutes into San Gregorio. A round trip bus ticket to San Gregorio costs 150 pesos (\$3.66), a not insignificant sum given local salaries.

Cañada del Estado once had issues with water supply, but it no longer does. People listen to radio stations from San Gregorio, Paso de los Toros, and Tacuarembó. There was a local TV station in San Gregorio, but it has closed. There is DirectTV. The television signal from Brazil does not quite reach the area.³²⁸ The only local commission in Cañada del Estado is the one dealing with the school.

Patricia explains that all the men here are *jornaleros* (day laborers) in the campo. Her husband works a hundred kilometers away on a large ranching establishment called Rincón de Zamora. Reaching this estancia takes a nearly three-hour trip, one made almost entirely on unpaved roads.³²⁹ Only once a month does he procure the leave to come back to Cañada del Estado. Employment in the area is stable, but there is less and less of it. Patricia's husband makes only 20,000 pesos (around \$500) per month. Forestry is the main productive sector of the area but does not add much employment. If anything, it has driven the decrease in employment. It

³²⁸ Along with driving distance to the border, the television signal is another proxy for how integrated Uruguayan communities are with Brazilian culture.

³²⁹ Measured by distance to services and population centers, Rincón de Zamora is probably the most isolated point in Uruguay. It takes even longer to travel from there to Tacuarembó than to San Gregorio.

started around thirty years ago, something Patricia remembers because she is thirty-three years old. The largest ranch in the area is called La Soledad and it employs only seven or eight people. When we ask about housing need, Patricia responds that Nestor, a peon, and his wife Micaela, a cook, have a place to live on La Soledad. Despite the loss of population, Patricia says there are no empty homes in Cañada del Estado. Her “*casa de chapón*” is the most precarious but the rest of the homes are in good enough condition. “*No hay necesidad de vivienda acá*” (there is no housing need here), she says. We ask about small family producers in Cañada del Estado. Patricia explains there are none and that nobody is living off the land. More and more ranchland is being turned into agroforestry.

Before we leave, Delia and Patricia are happy to announce that tomorrow there will be a benefit event for the school with board games, truco, hot chocolate, and *tortas fritas*.³³⁰ In September, there will be a big party that serves as a reunion for the former students of the school.

We bid farewell and head into San Gregorio to look around at houses a bit (especially on the periphery), including the more recent MEVIR nucleus and the Plan Juntos homes. We notice that the homes closer to the water are more aimed at tourists and not open for permanent rental. Plada says that precarity is hard to define in numbers. Analyzing this properly is something MEVIR would need more time to do, in a town the size of San Gregorio at least. What we are doing is a review, rather than making a complete census.

We stop for lunch at Médanos, a restaurant facing the water and opposite from the eponymously named hotel run by the Intendencia. The *chivitos al plato* are wholly unremarkable.³³¹ We are the only patrons, and the service is slow despite this. At least there is a

³³⁰ *Tortas fritas* are dough deep-fried in beef fat. They are a favored snack of Uruguayans, especially on cold and or rainy days.

³³¹ A *chivito* is often considered Uruguay’s national dish. It is served either as a sandwich, or *al plato* (on a plate). The base is a thinly-sliced piece of steak. The basic accompaniments generally include tomatoes, lettuce,

mural of robot-like figures on the outside at which to marvel. On a windy winter day, no warmer than 50 degrees, it is difficult to imagine how this moribund, freshwater beach town comes alive in the summer. If the Rincón del Bonete reservoir, with its many artificial bays and inlets, were located in the United States it would be a boater's paradise, such as the Lake of the Ozarks. In Uruguay profundo, alas, it is recreationally obsolete for nine months out of the year.

After lunch, we separate. There are three more destinations to assess. Núñez chooses the high school. On account of her duties at the high school in Vichadero, she is especially interested in seeing how secondary education happens elsewhere. Plada says that Lasarte in her capacity as social worker would be best for the CAIF. The CAIFs, short for *Centros de Atención a la Infancia y a la Familia* (Family and Child Care Centers), are state sponsored creches for kids from birth to age three. So Plada takes what is left, the grade school. He asks me which destination I prefer. I tell him I want to visit the CAIF. I know high schools well from my time in 2014, and grade schools somewhat, but I have never been to a CAIF. Moreover, I have heard great things about the CAIF as a highly respected social policy and institution, with a prestige approaching that of MEVIR.

Receiving Lasarte and me at the CAIF are Celia, who is the center's psychometrist, and Dionilda, a *maestra referente*, who is also qualified as a high school geography teacher. She graduated last year from the teacher training tertiary institute in Tacuarembó, for which she was able to do some of her coursework remotely from San Gregorio. She mentions that in her second year of the *profesorado*, she did a report on one of the MEVIR nuclei in San Gregorio, within which she looked at how families had amended their properties. As a good student, Dionilda takes her own notes throughout, and is not afraid to ask us questions. Both Celia and Dionilda

mozzarella, mayonnaise, and French fries. More elaborate versions will include ham, bacon, red pepper, potato salad, fried eggs, and hard-boiled eggs.

are from San Gregorio, and they live there. Ten people work in the CAIF. There are three *educadoras*, and a *maestra referente*, *gestora* (manager), psychologist, social worker, psychometrist, cook, and *auxiliar*.

No children are present. Chairs and other supplies are neatly stacked against the walls, which are painted in bright colors. Various mobiles hang from the ceiling. Dionilda and Celia let Lasarte and me take the two adult sized chairs, while they sit on ones more suited to the anatomy of young children.

Both Dionilda and Celia see communications as the main challenge for San Gregorio. “*San Gregorio queda para adentro. Es el fin de la linea. Profesionales no llegan acá por el traslado*” (San Gregorio is [so far] inland. It’s the end of the line. Professionals don’t come here because it takes too long). At least the bus frequency increases during the summer. However, the bus operated by Posadas that continues to Rivera does not run on Sundays.

San Gregorio has a very fluctuating population, they note. In the winter, tour groups of retirees visit, although we did not see any on this particular Friday. During the high season, the influx of people puts pressure on usage of the local water supply. A lot of people with summer homes in San Gregorio retreated there during the pandemic, but they are mainly older people, and not part of a population that would have an impact on the selection of participants for a MEVIR plan. Young people who leave San Gregorio to study (in Tacuarembó or Montevideo) tend not to come back.

Celia and Dionilda mention some civil society groups about whom we have not heard. There is an organization of pensioners, a cooperative of fishermen, and an office of the *Sindicato Único Nacional de la Construcción y Anexos* (Single National Union of Construction and Annexes), or SUNCA, the national construction workers union. This last is here now that the

bridge is under construction. There is a development commission for the local hospital, and MIDES operates a community garden for both consumption and sale.

The subject turns to local employment. Tourism jobs generally come from food service and from letting out rooms during the high season. There are only three hotels in the town and they are not very big. There is also a new campground. The municipality provides seasonal employment to locals during the winter. Dionilda and Celia add a data point that had eluded me earlier, one relevant to the debate about plan boundaries. Achar belongs to the municipality of San Gregorio. As such, this CAIF receives some children living in Achar.

Public health is a topic we make sure to discuss. The children with whom they work lack medical specialists. Celia explains how she and her team often have to insist that children receive health care. There are also lots of delays. Births happen in Tacuarembó, and there are only two ambulances. Lots of issues show up on the *carne de salud* (health ID cards) of children. The conclusion reached is that medicine needs to be a lot closer to daily life in the area.

Now Lasarte asks about education. Dionilda and Celia explain that the use of this building is thanks to a *comodato* (gratuitous loan) made by the Catholic Church seven years ago. They are grateful to have the space, but they would like to find something bigger. In San Gregorio there is one all-day school, a half-day school, and an escuela rural called “Los Cerros,” which is situated on the outskirts.³³² In town, there is also a full-time *jardín* day care for children from ages three to five. There is one high school and also a vocational school of the UTU. Achar

³³² Students in Uruguayan primary schools generally study for four hours per day. Students either study in the morning before lunch (*turno matutino*), or in the afternoon after lunch (*turno vespertino*). Some schools have become eight-hour schools (*tiempo completo*), especially in more complicated socioeconomic contexts.

has a *liceo rural* (a high school focused on rural issues), but this only reaches through ninth grade, so students who want to study for their *bachillerato* come to San Gregorio.³³³

Dionilda and Celia begin sharing some features of local economic life, which come new to us. When the water level is low, some people extract sand for sale. Gathering wood for firewood is also profitable for some. On the Durazno side of the river, there is a small Russian colony that brings produce during the summer. Continuing with the Russian theme, they mention a fascinating example of how a place as remote as San Gregorio is connected with the global economy. There is a caviar sturgeon plant named “Estuario del Plata” that employs between twenty and thirty people.³³⁴ It produces for export and also sells the fish meat of the sturgeons. The ranching profile in the area includes more cows than sheep. Cows are raised for their meat rather than serving as dairy animals. The one milk yard in the area closed. On the Durazno side, there are farms of the INC.

We return to the subject of housing and social problems. There are no vacant homes. Demand is more urban than rural. Multiple families with kids in the CAIF are living precariously. Sometimes they are given the land on which to live. One family lives in a tent. Dionilda uses her fingers to count. Sixteen families rent, sometimes just a room in a house, while three live “*en asignamiento*.” Seventeen families are “*agregados*”, which means they have added dwellings onto their family’s lot. Lasarte comments how nobody in small towns knows family situations better than the CAIF workers. A recurring national theme arises, that of locals pursuing the help of MEVIR before MEVIR seeks them. Dionilda and Celia mention how around five

³³³ This underscores the important geographical point that regional differences are not just about what activities and customs happen in a given place. They are also about to what other places any specific place is connected, and how and why.

³³⁴ According to the website of Polanco caviar, the only caviar harvested in the Southern Hemisphere comes from Uruguay’s Río Negro.

years earlier, there had been a petition to bring MEVIR to San Gregorio. More than 300 families signed. Dionilda asks Lasarte about her own case, since her father had subdivided his land for his three children.

When we step outside after the formal part of the interview, I ask more questions about the sturgeons. Dionilda is familiar with the matter, as a person close to her worked there. She explains that they are slaughtered in San Gregorio, and the meat is then stored somewhere in Florida. The plant has been in Uruguay for around a decade. The salaries it pays are very low, in the range of 16,000 to 20,000 pesos monthly. The work is dangerous and less desirable than working on a ranch. For example, whenever the weather becomes bad, there is no lifeguard to warn of occupational dangers. All of the skilled labor comes from Montevideo, and the company is not transparent about the sources of its capital.

As we regroup on our way out of town, the value of the strategy of dividing the work becomes apparent. Driving slowly so that we can see a few of the murals, Plada, Lasarte, and Núñez share what they found. Núñez reports the high school employees told her that generations of youth do not emancipate themselves from their parents. Alcoholism is the worst problem for students. The state has reduced provision of local jobs except for seasonal work. Plada explains how in their report to MEVIR, they will need to cite their sources. The next week they will make the report, sharing it subsequently with Meseguez, and the social worker who is in charge of sign-up.

On the open road, Lasarte and Núñez (who began in MEVIR during the EU project), reminisce about their earlier days. Both worked with a late architect based in Tacuarembó with the surnames López Llano. They describe him as someone who “*acercaba mucho a la población*” (who was close to the people). Núñez comments that “I love Mieres [MEVIR’s

second president]. A gentleman. Delicate in the details.” Lasarte’s first *obra* was the fourth plan in José Enrique Rodó, a town along Ruta 2 in Soriano that has been marked heavily by MEVIR. Her second *obra* was in 25 de Mayo, located in Florida’s dairy belt. Gallinal was still alive then and he came to both inaugurations. Lasarte recalls how when he showed up, people stopped in their tracks with the utmost respect.

After getting back on Ruta 5, we stop in Peralta, where Núñez has arranged to catch a bus northbound for Rivera, where her husband will meet her and drive home to Vichadero. At the *garita* (bus shelter), Lasarte runs into a participant with whom she worked in 2015, on the most recent nucleus in Peralta. This former participant is picking up her nephew, returning from studying at the UTU in Paso de Los Toros. Lasarte has clearly inculcated one of MEVIR’s core values. “It is a sacrifice”, the participant tells Lasarte, “even if he gets up at six in the morning to catch the bus.”

Traffic then slows to a crawl thanks to an accident involving a logging truck. This means a much later than expected arrival in Durazno, where we drop off Lasarte. Plada and I then stop for dinner in Sarandí Grande at the Uruguayan equivalent of a roadside diner. We dive into a heaping plate of *asado de tira* (a cut of shortrib favored by Uruguayans) and we reflect on the *jornada*. Plada summarizes what these days mean to him. Territorial investigation update tours are about building trust and giving time for institutions to prepare for MEVIR’s arrival. The more planning takes place, the smoother the work of the *obra* will be. At 1:00 AM, twenty hours after our departure, we arrive safely at MEVIR’s parking spot in the garage on Avenida Paraguay. Amused by the day’s events, Plada jokes, “there are long *jornadas*, then there are long *jornadas*.”

ANNOUNCEMENTS

After MEVIR has completed its first reconnaissance mission, one that helps it decide what plan to build (meaning how many homes in total, and just how many homes of what types), the next step is to disseminate MEVIR's imminent arrival to locals. To do this, MEVIR's president and leading officials come to a town and give a press conference.

San Ramón (Canelones), 22 April 2022

It was not my intention to come to MEVIR's public announcement of its plan in San Ramón. I left Montevideo that morning with social worker Silvia Cuello to accompany her to the sign up for participants in Casupá. MEVIR's president Juan Pablo Delgado and his political secretary Leonardo Castro, happened to come by Casupá on their way to San Ramón, even though it is an additional 40 kilometers further from Montevideo. I recount Delgado's speech to the potential participants in Casupá later in this chapter. Castro asked me if I wanted to come along to the announcements in San Ramón, a town he knows well because his mother hails from there, and because he is politically well-connected there.

My ethnography of MEVIR was filled with instances demanding my selectivity regarding which events were most worthy of my attendance. This abundance of choice is due to the variety of activities that MEVIR conducts, and because MEVIR has activities going on concurrently in many places at once. Part of my decision to accompany Castro and Delgado came from the fact that I had not yet been to a press conference announcing a plan. And I also knew my experience of San Ramón would be enriched by having the gregarious Castro as a guide. Most of my decision, however, had to do with evaluating ethnographic trade-offs. Interviews at sign-up by social workers of potential participants are arguably the moment of greatest vulnerability during the entire MEVIR process. This is because many families may be asked to share intimate details

about their personal lives or otherwise potentially embarrassing data on things such as health or employment.³³⁵ While being interviewed, families are often nervous about whether anything they say or any documents they present, could disqualify them. Out of respect for the trust needed to be built between MEVIR social workers and the institution's target population, I felt it was important for me to refrain from being present during these interviews. Moreover, I had just observed the non-confidential part of the sign-up process, where Cuello made a presentation, and she and her colleagues set up the venue for interviews. Combined with the fact that social workers can fill me in on what happened in ways that do not breach the confidentiality of participants, this made me confident that it would be best to go to San Ramón.

Delgado, Castro, and I park outside of the municipality building along the main street in San Ramón. We mingle for a while with the local journalists present for the event. The Salón de Actos del Municipio de San Ramón Juan Pedro Tapié Piñeyro has been outfitted for today's press conference.³³⁶ A few journalists, already briefed by MEVIR's communications office, have set up their cameras strategically around the chairs that have been placed for spectators. There are more people in the room than chairs, so a handful of us stand up, myself included. At the far end of the room, there is a long table set with microphones and water glasses. Behind this table sit the dignitaries who will be speaking at the press conference: Delgado, Castro, and Amen from MEVIR, along with three local politicians. Behind the table are banners for MEVIR and for the municipality of San Ramón.

³³⁵ For example, MEVIR is prioritizing housing for women who have suffered sexual abuse. This is not simply because sexual abuse is an important factor in determining the level of vulnerability of a person. Having one's home also helps create independence and a safe space separate from abusers.

³³⁶ Juan Pedro Tapié Piñeyro (1879-1946), a native of San Ramón, co-founded the London París, one of Montevideo's most successful department stores. The original building was constructed between 1905 and 1908 and designed by the Anglo-Uruguayan architect John Adams (died 1938). It lies less than two blocks from MEVIR's office. Tapié Piñeyro's philanthropic efforts are evident in San Ramón today, especially in the educational sphere.

Castro begins by explaining that MEVIR does not want people in the area to miss the news of the institution's arrival. He stresses he personally will be present at the sign-up, in order to help direct aspiring locals towards the MEVIR information and personnel they need. Delgado announces that MEVIR will be building both nucleated homes and *terreno propio* homes. He says it has been too long since MEVIR has come to San Ramón. It is place where they can take advantage of the LUC articles that increased MEVIR's population threshold. He reviews a list explaining the criteria in the *convocatoria* (call for participants), which includes the requirements that need to be met, including what documentation is needed to present. He concludes by reflecting on the uniqueness of MEVIR, "This is not for everyone. You have to be willing to sacrifice." Amen, wearing his trademark sleeveless vest during the colder months, begins by saying that "unlike many of the things the state does, MEVIR brings joy." He highlights how the question of land is very important to MEVIR, and that the institution does not get anywhere on mere goodwill. The homes to be built in San Ramón, he is pleased to announce, will be bigger and cheaper than previous ones. This will come because MEVIR has teamed up with Uruguay's first producer of cellular concrete, Isobrick, who opened a small factory last year in Chamizo. Experimenting with building materials has been the focus of Amen's tenure during the current administration. Here he stresses how they are helping MEVIR find ways to think in the longer term. Gonzalo Melogno, the alcalde of San Ramón, and a first cousin of Castro, beams that this is good for San Ramón.³³⁷ He notes that the municipality will work with MEVIR throughout the process, and he thanks the *concejal* Fernando Melgar for making sure that the *terreno* (land) for the nucleus was acquired in a central location.³³⁸

³³⁷ Two other local politicians spoke, but I did not write down what they said, probably because I did not find anything significant new points beyond what others had already contributed.

³³⁸ After the event, I spoke with a *vecina* who is actively involved in charitable causes in San Ramón. She remarked to me how San Ramón's existing nucleus has been less successful than nuclei in other towns in terms of social

After the dignitaries talk, the journalists ask a few questions. This gives Delgado occasion to mention more features and benefits of MEVIR. He highlights, for example, that construction will help San Ramón's local economy, as over a dozen skilled construction workers will live and spend money there.

MEETING WITH LOCAL ACTORS

Shortly after the press conference, and a couple of weeks before the sign up of participants takes place, there are two more tasks that take MEVIR technicians (rather than its political leaders) to the towns where the plan will take place. These are a collective meeting with local actors, and the distribution of leaflets containing details about the sign-up. The former has much in common with the territorial investigation update tour. However, there are differences. Rather than serving as a reconnaissance of previously-gathered knowledge to assist MEVIR's decision on the number and type of homes to be built, the collective meeting with local leaders, or *actores*, is about ensuring that the sign-up goes as smoothly as possible. The *actores* are usually people who work directly with the target population. On these trips MEVIR tries to bring the field-based social worker who will lead the *obra* along with one office-based social worker, a person who works more closely with the selection of participants. Rather than being spread out over various meetings, with different people at a range of sites, this *jornada* centers on a single large meeting, one that unites local actors. It does not however include visits to other sites around town as time allows. These meetings are about further cementing relationships between MEVIR the national institution, where technicians come from Montevideo and/or the departmental capitals, and locally-based leaders who have had sustained contact with the families who will

integration with the rest of the town. This stems from its peripheral location. She contrasts this with nearby towns such as Santa Rosa.

sign up for a chance to build their MEVIR home. This step also illustrates how MEVIR is an institution that deals with many variables at once in its preparation for a plan. Remaining as transparent as possible, and working to combat misinformation, is a key task of MEVIR technicians at this stage, in an effort to prevent confusion that may arise down the road.

Chuy (Rocha), 29 September 2022

On a Friday in mid-September, I bumped into Treinta y Tres-based Diego Duarte, who is MEVIR's first and only male social worker, outside of the UdelaR's Social Sciences Faculty in central Montevideo, where he is doing a postgraduate course in urban studies and planning for social workers.³³⁹ He encouraged me to come with him two weeks later to Chuy for the meeting with local actors and informed me why Chuy was such an interesting place for MEVIR to intervene, and therefore for me to visit.³⁴⁰

Duarte and I had arranged that I would take a bus to Treinta y Tres the night before and that we would leave early the next morning, meeting later his colleague Ana Laura García, who would arrive in Chuy by bus from Montevideo. Though this would increase my travel time by a couple hours, it would allow me plenty of time to chat with Duarte about the plan and his experience in MEVIR, as well as see parts of the country I had not traversed before, such as the town of Lascano, a site of significant MEVIR intervention.

My ride up Ruta 8 on a Rutas del Plata bus was going well. The *guarda* served passengers an *alfajor* and a coffee once we left Pando, an hour past Montevideo's Tres Cruces central bus station.³⁴¹ I made sure to procure a window seat on the right to enjoy the view of the

³³⁹ Duarte began in MEVIR in 2016. During the time of my fieldwork in 2022, MEVIR hired a male social working student as a trainee in the office.

³⁴⁰ When pronouncing Chuy, the accent comes on the final syllable (choo-EE).

³⁴¹ Most Uruguayan long-distance bus lines do not offer such complimentary perks. Another welcome exception is COPAY between Montevideo and Paysandú.

Sierras de Minas (Uruguay's tallest hills) lit by the evening sun. As the bus approached José Pedro Varela, a half-hour before my destination, Duarte called to ask where I was. With the calm of a social worker, he explained that he had sprained his ankle while running that afternoon in the countryside outside of Treinta y Tres and was currently unable to walk, and thus unable to drive to Chuy tomorrow. Instead, he would stay home with a bucket of ice. Since my arrival to Treinta y Tres was imminent, he told me that there is a bus that thankfully leaves there at 5:45 AM that will take me to Chuy.

When I disembarked at the terminal in Chuy, I changed the return bus tickets I had reserved for García and myself to a bus that leaves for Montevideo at 15:30, rather than 17:15. Since we no longer had a car, there was less we could do in Chuy after the meetings, because the town is rather spread out. For example, we would not have time to stop at all of the schools.

Chuy, often referred to colloquially with a definite article appended, “el Chuy”, occupies an important place in Uruguayan consciousness for a town of its size.³⁴² This is not because any major historical event happened here, or because any famous soccer player, politician, or musician hails from here. Nor is it on account of any aesthetic qualities. In fact, one thing many Uruguayans can agree on is that Chuy is not especially pretty.

Situated 340 kilometers from Montevideo at the terminus of Ruta 9, some ten kilometers inland from the Atlantic, Chuy is the easternmost of the border crossings between Uruguay and Brazil, and by far the one with which most Uruguayans are likely to be familiar. The term crossing, however, is somewhat misleading. Chuy is in fact two cities wrapped into a single

³⁴² As the southernmost municipality in Brazil, Chuí, the Brazilian town contiguous with Chuy, also occupies an important place in Brazilian consciousness, even if a far smaller percentage of Brazilians have been there than the percentage of Uruguayans who have been to Chuy. The phrase “do Oiapoque ao Chuí” is a metonym for the geographic extent of Brazil and is the title of a famous sertanejo song. Oiapoque, in the state of Amapá and on the border with French Guiana, is Brazil's northernmost municipality along the Atlantic.

contiguous place. The Brazilian and Uruguayan sides are separated by an avenue across which there is unchecked freedom of movement. Uruguay and Brazil have a *frontera seca*, or a dry border. On the outskirts of town on both the Uruguayan and Brazilian sides, there are customs checkpoints at which vehicles must slow down, and migration control centers at which one should stop if they are traveling further beyond the border town.

This avenue, confusingly called Avenida Brasil on the Uruguayan side and Avenida Uruguay on the Brazilian side, is the heart of the town. On the Uruguayan side, there is an abundance of duty-free shops selling luxury goods. Unlike the duty-free shops in some Uruguayan cities along the Brazilian border, the ones in Chuy do not require a non-Uruguayan identity document in order to make purchases.³⁴³ The Brazilian side is full of supermarkets and clothing stores selling goods at cheaper prices than in Uruguay, and often in bulk quantities which are hard to find in Montevideo. For these reasons, Chuy is a major destination for Uruguayans. It is especially popular in the summer months when vacationers at Punta del Diablo and other Rocha beaches are looking for something to do on a rainy day, or they need to *hacer el surtido* (stock up on foodstuffs) for their vacation rental. Chuy's role as a retail center is sustained in part by a large community of Palestinian merchants, and Chuy is the only town in

³⁴³ Chuy is unique amongst the six bi-national towns along the Uruguay-Brazil border in that it is considerably closer to Montevideo than it is to Porto Alegre. The other five border towns are more equidistant between the two capitals. The thin strip of Brazilian territory that lies north of Chuy and between the Merín Lagoon and the Atlantic is very sparsely populated. Largely contiguous with a historical region known as the Campos Neutrais (Neutral Fields), Santa Vitória do Palmar, the Brazilian municipality north of Chuí, stretches about 160 kilometers from south to north, yet it has fewer than 30,000 people. The nearest large cities, Pelotas and Rio Grande, lie a three-hour drive from the border. Thus, the duty-free shops in Rivera and Río Branco make for more convenient day trips for larger numbers of Brazilians than those in Chuy. My anecdotal observations on two trips to Chuy corroborate some of these patterns. In Chuy, the only border town not considered in the north of Uruguay, I did not hear as much Portuguese spoken, and I did not see as many Afro-Uruguayans or Afro-Brazilians as in Jaguarão or Quaraí, for example. On the Brazilian side of Chuy, unlike on the Brazilian side of other border towns, most signs are in Spanish, and many of the people there speak Spanish in a southern Uruguayan accent.

Uruguay whose skyline is marked by the minaret of a mosque, which lies on the Brazilian side.³⁴⁴

Walking from the bus terminal on the south end of town to the hotel a block from the border, where I will meet García, many of these traits become apparent to me. At the terminal, a poster for tourists from the Intendencia of Rocha advertises shopping along Avenida Brasil as the first activity. I pass by the headquarters of Central Palestino F.C., a local soccer club associated with the Palestinian community. There are noticeably few businesses on the Uruguayan side, as price differentials with the Brazilian competitors make such endeavors less profitable.³⁴⁵

Before starting at MEVIR, Ana Laura García worked as a social worker with the MIDES from 2005 to 2015. At MEVIR she works closely with Yamila Meseguez and Victoria Morena on questions of selecting participants. She hails from Rosario del Colla in Colonia Department, the hometown of Diego Godín, the most capped footballer in the history of Uruguay's national team. García explains how Rosario and Juan Lacaze are the two main industrial towns in Colonia Department, contrasting notably with other towns there, centered on tourism or agriculture.

García and I meet at the Nuevo Hotel Plaza on Chuy's main plaza a block south of the border. The meeting hall of a Catholic parish on the west side of the plaza will be the meeting place for the morning's proceedings. Before heading to the meeting, García and I have time to sit for coffee and chat about the plan. She makes the point that our mission today combines the meeting with local actors and the distribution of leaflets (below I recount a jornada in Puntas de Valdéz devoted exclusively to distributing leaflets). Since representatives from most of the

³⁴⁴ The Montevideo-based Spanish journalist Magdalena Martínez Vial wrote about the Palestinians of Chuy in a 2014 article for *El País* of Spain. The Uruguayan government floated Chuy, on account of the town's Arab connections, as a possible destination for Guantanamo detainees that Uruguay agreed to resettle. See: Martínez Vial (2014).

³⁴⁵ Recent Uruguayan governments have sought to combat these price differentials. For example, gas stations near the border have become subject to tax exemptions and other discounts.

referential local institutions are coming to the meeting, there is less need to go around giving out flyers, though we will visit some schools and policlinics.

García starts by briefing me on some basic facts. According to the 2011 census, there are around 10,000 people on the Uruguayan side. Estimates from that time put around half as many on the Brazilian side. In the last decade, Chuy has grown a lot. Some now estimate as many as 15,000 residents on the Uruguayan side and 6,000 on the Brazilian end. García attributes this growth to two factors. The first source of the population growth is retirees, especially from Montevideo and Canelones, people who want their money to go further. In addition, there has been an international migration of Venezuelans, Cubans, and Haitians southward through Brazil. García signals that in transitory Chuy, you are more likely to see people with backpacks.

Chuy is not a typical MEVIR destination. Only because of the LUC is MEVIR now able to build here. García explains that MEVIR needs to be very specific with the parameters of the *llamado*. If it does not run a tight ship, there could be as many as a thousand families signing up for a mere fifty homes. This situation comes in part from Chuy's absolute population but also on account of the border dynamics. In order to meet eligibility, families either need to live on the Uruguayan side, or they can reside in Brazilian Chuí, but only when meeting specific screening circumstances. Applicants resident in Brazil will need to have worked for at least the last five years on the Uruguayan side of the international border, while any children they have must be enrolled in Uruguayan schools. Any Brazilian-based applicants must also be Uruguayan citizens.

García's intention for the day is to present the *llamado* in all its social, economic, and geographic details, and then concentrate specifically on the process of the *derivaciones*, or special cases. In this plan, forty-five of the fifty families will be chosen by drawing them randomly. The other five *cupos* (slots) will be reserved for *derivaciones*. She will take care

however, not to divulge that the derivaciones represent only ten percent of the participants, so as not to hurt the hopes of locals, which could make them complain.

She explains to me the local landscape of actors who will be involved with the plan. Since Chuy is a larger town than most of the places where MEVIR goes, it contains more organizations to be dealt with than is normal. There are five organizations working with youth. García's contacts in Chuy are mainly social workers, including one based at the hospital. She expects the principals of both the Chuy high school and the UTU to attend, along with a social worker from the municipality and an inspector of primary schools. The local MIDES social worker is currently on leave.

The congregants trickle in slowly and they greet each other well after the supposed starting time of the meeting. One of them comments that "we are on Uruguayan time". In a subtle example of MEVIR's local knowledge gathering, García asks about which local bakeries offer *boleto* (receipts for invoice) from which MEVIR can order lunch during the sign-up days. In order to get reimbursed, MEVIR staff will need to eat on the Uruguayan side even though prices on the Brazilian are cheaper (few tourists to Chuy eat on the Uruguayan side). They recommend a place called Tango, also adding that the parish hall we are in is used for a lot of events including meetings of Uruguay Trabaja, a MIDES initiative that brought García here once under the auspices of her previous employer.

By the time the eighth and last and guest arrives, we stop extending greetings. García and I had already set up plastic chairs in a circle. We were waiting outside in the patio soaking up the *solcito*.

When we sit down, García introduces herself and me, then announces that Diego Duarte will be the social worker and the Maldonado-based Alejandro Guttds will be the architect for the

plan. Six of the eight actores have brought their *mate* and *termo* (thermos) of hot water. García makes it clear that even though she is here today, she is not responsible for this plan. Duarte, who would be here were it not for his accident, will be their main point of contact after families are selected. García then explains the purposes of this meeting, saying “MEVIR has not come to Chuy before, but you probably know that”, to which the actores nod their heads. She references other MEVIR interventions in Rocha, including the plan which is now underway in Castillos.

García hands out a copy of the llamado to each of the actors present, announcing that sign up will be from 11 until 14 October, an initiative that will take lots of manpower from MEVIR’s staff of social workers on account of the high volume of families expected to apply. She makes it clear that families must be on time and that it is crucial they listen to the opening presentation, in order to know for sure whether they fall within the requirements. Most of the *actores* are taking notes. García explains that families will be assigned a day to sign up based on the first digit of their *cedula* (state ID), though MEVIR will not enforce this strictly. She continues discussing a few more parameters of the plan. First, the plan will only be a nucleus for now, although it may subsequently include terreno propio homes. There is no upper limit on the age of participants. They do need to be fit enough, though, to work the required hours and to complete the tasks of construction. MEVIR has removed the balneario Barra del Chuy, ten kilometers away, from the geographical area from which participants can come.

The boundary of the plan also ends squarely on the international border. García clarifies that “MEVIR cannot enact an Uruguayan policy for territory outside of Uruguay.” The bi-national nature of Chuy is a key concern of the actores. Maximo Ferreira, a local politician who works for the MIDES, adds that there are as many as three thousand Uruguayan nationals living on the Brazilian side. Another actor explains that people in Chuy move around frequently on

account of the nature of the local economy. García clarifies that such mobility is fine for accessing the MEVIR plan as long as it is within the area of the llamado.

García continues by prefacing there will be complicated cases that come up when families interview. She gives some theoretical examples. What if you have a good house, but it is located on your mother's land? MEVIR, she asserts, is not just about whether somebody has property, but how they use their space. MEVIR will prioritize people who are more likely to be evicted from wherever they are living. She adds that it is one thing to add two rooms to your parents' house, still using their kitchen and bathroom, but a very different matter if you build an entirely new house on their property. "In MEVIR, we see a million scenarios", she concludes.

When García reaches the matter of "*vinculo con la zona*" (the nature of a person's link to the area), the crowd pipes up, because this is the meat of the llamado specific to Chuy. At this point in the meeting, there is more and more back and forth between García and the actores locales, who serve as mediators between MEVIR and potential participants. She explains that because MEVIR wants to keep demand for the plan at a scale reasonable for it to handle, the organization's usual five-year residency requirement has been lowered to three years for Chuy. Questions will come up, she notes, about how to prove the location of any informal work (meaning above all whether this involves the Uruguayan side as opposed to the Brazilian). MEVIR will allow participants to present a range of documents. When taken as a broader group, such documents can help MEVIR to piece together applicants' work histories. For example, a cleaning lady can request a note from the families whose houses she cleaned in such and such a year. One of the actores claims that informal work is very common for youth in Chuy.

The *llamado* has five main categories for eligibility: age, housing need, link to the area, income, and willingness to work on construction. In general terms, these hold for all MEVIR

plans. However MEVIR does adjust the details slightly depending on the particularities of the place. The only category MEVIR is unable to check during the sign-up stage is housing need (a matter that is more qualitative than the others). The social workers who interview potential participants at sign-up take participants at their word. They will double check the veracity of any offered information once the participants have been selected and the technical team has the chance to visit them at their home.³⁴⁶ García adds that participants cannot have previously accepted a state housing subsidy.³⁴⁷

García explains MEVIR considers all forms of income, encompassing informal and formal, permanent and temporary.³⁴⁸ She remarks families often do not know how much money they are making. They are sometimes paid and then pay their bills without doing any kind of accounting. The two weeks of lead time between this meeting and the sign up will help families iron out some of these doubts about earnings. García also explains that MEVIR has a minimum and maximum threshold for income. This helps more families apply when compared with a sole-earner household. The topic of making the installment rent payments (*cuotas*) also comes up. García explains that *cuotas* depend on the condition of each family that applies.

³⁴⁶ On the bus back to Montevideo, García explains to me that verifying the veracity of information submitted by prospective participants (and not just for housing need) is a time-consuming task for her and her colleagues. On a recent plan in Ombues de Lavalle, a hundred families signed up, and that meant a week's worth of work. Ten families from the group of signers generated some level of doubt.

³⁴⁷ In an anecdote showing how MEVIR's dissemination of information is as much about informal as formal interactions and how it values in-person interactions, García told me about something that happened the night before. When she had checked into the hotel, the receptionist asked her about signing up for the MEVIR plan. This receptionist had already signed up for a housing cooperative, but it could be years before building happens. García explained to her that she could sign up for MEVIR as long as she did not start building in the cooperative first. The receptionist happily replied, "*¡Que bueno! Ya me sacaste la duda. No tengo que llamar*" (Great, you've answered my question. I don't have to call [MEVIR]).

³⁴⁸ Despite MEVIR's Catholic origins, it has never turned away participants for being sex workers, notes retired social worker Magela Vicentino. Vicentino recalls working with participants who were prostitutes on a plan in La Charqueada in the early 1970s (interview, 22 June 2022). One MEVIR technician has seen participants who are sex workers ask for their home to be built with an arrangement of doors conducive to running their business. MEVIR has not gone so far as to accommodate this.

Mutual aid and construction work comes up next. The local UTU director argues mutual aid helps contribute to a sense of belonging to the place. Others express some skepticism that *chuienses* will be able to put in the requisite hours. García explains that MEVIR cannot change mutual aid. It is a mandatory part of the policy and of MEVIR's philosophy. Social workers will give families leeway however with the timing of their hours, if they hold season jobs for example. She comments how nearby Castillos has seen lots of families drop out after being selected because they could not, or did not want, to complete their hours. How to implement mutual aid construction is a major challenge for MEVIR as it expands to larger markets when activating the LUC articles. García explains to the *actores*, who have never worked with MEVIR before, that the organization was designed for people in the “*medio rural profundo*”, or areas that are much more rural than Chuy, both in their size and in their economic activity. In Castillos (pop. 7,541), she notes, a higher proportion of residents work jobs with regular hours such as at a supermarket or an Abitab.³⁴⁹

García moves to the matter of derivaciones, passing out a packet titled “Instruction on *derivaciones* for cases in nucleated plans”. Rosana, who works for the MIDES, observes families in Chuy will use *viveza criolla* to manipulate the system to their advantage.³⁵⁰ One *actor* invokes a fascinating quandary of people living in border towns to illustrate how *viveza criolla* might happen in Chuy. He explains that Uruguayans who die on the Brazilian side will do whatever they can to obtain death certificates indicating that they died on the Uruguayan side so as not to have to deal with the Brazilian bureaucracy in Porto Alegre. By lying about specific places of

³⁴⁹ Abitab and Redpagos are Uruguay's two catch-all bill payment chains. Their storefronts are ubiquitous across the country. There is even an Abitab nextdoor to the MEVIR office in Montevideo.

³⁵⁰ *Viveza criolla* is a *rioplatense* phrase, which loosely translates to “the creole's cunning”. It is used to describe an attitude by which people circumvent rules and responsibility towards others. After Luis Suárez bit Italy defender Giorgio Chiellini during the 2014 World Cup, the *Economist* called the Uruguayan striker's actions a case of *viveza criolla*. The article does a good job of explaining the concept in the context of soccer and of Argentina's financial woes. See: *Economist* (2014).

death, they save thousands of dollars in repatriation fees. Holding true to what she had hinted to me before the meeting, García explains that there will be a certain number of slots for derivaciones. She does not specify exactly how many, although she does say it will be at least ten percent of the families chosen. For derivaciones, MEVIR will focus on cases of domestic violence, chronic illness, and disability. Since they hold a better knowledge of individual families, it will be up to the local actors and the institutions for which they work, to share with MEVIR which families will qualify for *derivaciones*. Each institution (MIDES and UTU are examples) can present up to three families, and a commission will evaluate the cases. One actor affirms that he and the others in the room will know which families are lying to MEVIR and which ones are not.

At the conclusion of the meeting, García hands out leaflets. These are for each of the actors to share with their networks, along with flyers for them to hang. There is deliberation about what institutions were missing from the meeting this morning, so that García can take the materials to them as well. García reaffirms that if they have any questions, they can call the MEVIR office. It is open for calls from Monday to Friday, and from 7:30 to 13:00. Roberto, who works at the local high school, gives García and me directions to School 88 (which we would like to visit) by drawing a map in his notebook. Typical of people from Rocha Department, he uses the second person pronoun *tú* with *vos* conjugations. A local journalist wants to interview García. She says that she does not have the authorization from MEVIR to grant this, so he interviews Maximo Ferreira instead, in his capacity as a local MIDES leader. Ferreira will run for *alcalde* in the next election cycle. Given the way he speaks, he is clearly using this as an opportunity to promote his political persona. After the interview, he asks García how many families she expects will sign up. She replies 300 to 500.

Before embarking to deliver leaflets and posters, García shows me a list of schools in Chuy, one broken down by income quintile and enrollment. Our first destination is a building in the Plaza Samuel Priliac that contains a *comedor* (akin to a soup kitchen) and a polyclinic.³⁵¹ We walk west ten or so blocks to reach there. In some places you can smell sewage in the *cordón cuneta* (curb and gutter). We are greeted by Carina, a nurse who works at the polyclinic, which exists due to a *convenio* between the ASSE and the Intendencia of Rocha. We are also greeted by Jovana, the head of the comedor and someone who García remarks to me represents a great example of a person on the ground to help the MEVIR plan run smoothly. Jovana's work makes her well positioned to prove family histories with regard to continuity in place that would confirm or deny families' eligibility to participate in MEVIR. Carina and Jovana mention how families from the Brazilian side come to the comedor for its services, including families from a favela, "Vila Portelinha". While we chat, there is a line extending out the door of people getting fed.

The next stop is School 88, around the corner, where we meet Karina, the principal, Carolina, a *maestra*, and Fabián, a school inspector. García explains that we are visiting this school because it has a disproportionately high number of low-income students.³⁵² Karina confirms with us that she received the details about the llamado yesterday through WhatsApp, and that she will share systematically the information with families. García adds that families should still go to the sign-up even if they have a schedule conflict, or are missing a necessary document. Carolina asks if families without children will be lower on the selection list. García says they will not. García shares the importance of doing mutual aid hours. Families can have

³⁵¹ Samuel Priliac (1909-1974), a Moldovan-born entrepreneur, arrived in Chuy in 1931. His shop on the border, Casa Samuel, played an important role in the rise of Chuy as a commercial center. See: Dornel (2012).

³⁵² The Spanish phrase García uses is "*contexto crítico*", which implies precarity in ways beyond income.

friends or relatives fill in for them occasionally, but these *colaboradores* (collaborators) are meant to complement the participants rather than replace them. She explains that the monthly installments are comparable with the rent payments they currently make, but that families will live in a much better quality of house. MEVIR's architects, she highlights, are exploring how they can maximize the number of homes on the site. And construction will likely start in early 2023.³⁵³ She tells them about *derivaciones*. As representatives of the school, they can identify and propose specific families for these exception slots. Each local institution, García remarks, will have a different perspective on the matter. García also clarifies that she is not the social worker for the plan, thus at no point in the process will she have contact with the families.

Karina explains that over sixty per cent of the five hundred students in the school live on the Brazilian side because rents are lower (García tells me later how both health care and education are better on the Uruguayan side of Chuy). She is very motivated about how MEVIR might fill this housing gap. Her body language suggests she is upset that this plan will be a drop in the bucket as far as addressing all of Chuy's housing needs but she expresses gratitude that the plan is happening at all. Only a small percentage of families at the school own their own home. Many are squatters. Most work as day laborers and in the informal sector. In transitory Chuy, the school even sees students coming from Montevideo or further north in Brazil. Some of them matriculate for only a week before moving on. Carolina adds that people will build with what materials they have and that rents on the Brazilian side are as low as 3000 pesos (around 77 USD) per month. Karina concludes that each teacher in the school will share the diffusion of the

³⁵³ In an example of how MEVIR does not see itself in opposition to cooperative housing, García later told me that the land for the plan is next to a series of cooperatives on the western entrance to town along Ruta 19. She expressed her thinking that it will be good for the participants to have other neighbors who also actively wanted to live in a group dynamic.

MEVIR plan with the families of their students. As we leave, García asks for directions back to the center of town. Carolina tells us to follow the highest wall of the cemetery.

On the walk back, García and I chat about the differences between Chuy and Bella Unión, a border town on the opposite end of the country, where MEVIR is also about to build thanks to the LUC, and where I will attend the same meeting some six weeks later. She signals a series of important differences that will become even more apparent to me in November. Historically a center of organized labor thanks to the presence of the sugar cane industry, Bella Unión (pop. 12,200) has even more civil organizations and a stronger state presence. The local leaders in Bella Unión know more about the specific details of the families because of the closer links to labor. For example, when it comes to *derivaciones*, Bella Unión has a strong pre-existing commission that will work on this issue. In Bella Unión, the border dynamic with Brazil is less immediate as there are several kilometers of road, plus a bridge over the Cuareim River separating Bella Unión from the Brazilian town of Barra do Quaraí. There are maybe only forty Uruguayan families living on the Brazilian side and they tend to be better off economically than the typical MEVIR participant. Even with all of the state interventions in housing in Bella Unión (one of the few places in the interior beyond Canelones where the Frente Amplio has seen sustained electoral success), there is still massive demand. A survey this month, García tells me, counted seventeen *asentamientos*, a significant amount and variety of informal settlement. Chuy, by contrast, does not so much have *asentamientos* as it has individual informal houses built in various places around town.³⁵⁴

³⁵⁴ A notable exception in Chuy is the *asentamiento* El Condón (literally, “the condom”), mentioned in one of the above strategic planning meetings by Juan Pablo Delgado. The settlement is so named because it is shaped in a form where there is an entrance but no exit.

We take our lunch back at the hotel on the plaza, which is unsurprisingly empty, given the cheaper prices across the border. Nonetheless, MEVIR employees need to dine at Uruguayan establishments, whenever they seek reimbursement for meals. García explains how in the coming days there will be a Zoom meeting with the whole sign-up team. She and Duarte will update the broader team so that everyone is in concert about how to react to certain scenarios that could arise in sign-up.

Bella Unión (Artigas), 10 November 2023

Bella Unión is known by Uruguayans for four things: having hot weather, being far away, sugar cane, and organized labor.

As far back as 2014, I can recall expressing interest in visiting Bella Unión to my friends in Cerro Chato. “*Te vas a morir de calor*” (you will die of heat), they said. All of Uruguay lies in temperate climate zones, but Artigas, as the northernmost department, experiences average summer highs nearly ten degrees Fahrenheit higher than Montevideo.³⁵⁵

Tucked in the northwest corner of Uruguay at the triple border with Argentina and Brazil, Bella Unión lies 625 kilometers from Montevideo at the terminus of Ruta 3.³⁵⁶ As Uruguay’s John O’ Groats, it is synonymous with the maximum geographic reach of state and nation. Thus

³⁵⁵ The average high temperature for a January in Montevideo is 82 degrees Fahrenheit. The average high in January in the city of Artigas, 135 kilometers east of Bella Unión, is 90 degrees Fahrenheit. A friend in Artigas who works as a high-school teacher tells me that during the summer months when he is off work, he flips around his days and nights to avoid the heat. He ensures any errands are completed by mid-morning, then he takes an extra-long siesta, and does not leave his house again until sundown.

³⁵⁶ Compared to the triple border of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, which is teeming with economic activity, is internationally renowned for Iguazu Falls and the Itaipú Dam, and has around a million inhabitants, MERCOSUR’s other triple border is a backwater. The phrase “triple border” is also a bit of a misnomer. Bella Unión and Barra do Quaraí (pop. 4,238) are connected by the bridge, but as the municipal employees explain to me after the meeting, Bella Unión is only connected to Monte Caseros (pop. 23,470), the Argentine town across the Uruguay River, by a ferry, one that runs only once per day. There have long been proposals to build the fourth international bridge connecting Uruguay and Argentina, but no plans have been confirmed. Moreover, the confluence point of the two rivers and three countries, which could be a major tourist draw is not easily accessible and lacks infrastructure or major monuments or viewpoints.

it is the Uruguayan place farthest away from Montevideo.³⁵⁷ “*Vamo’ arriba la Celeste desde el Cerro a Bella Unión*” (Let’s go la Celeste from the Cerro [fortress of Montevideo] to Bella Unión) sings Jaime Roos, one of Uruguay’s most beloved singer-songwriters in *Cuando Juega Uruguay*, a de facto anthem of Uruguay’s national soccer team. At eight hours by bus on the brightly orange-painted El Norteño fleet (there are two services per day), Bella Unión is only an hour closer to Montevideo by bus than Miami is from Montevideo by plane.

Bella Unión’s warmer climate contributes not just to stereotypes about heat, but also to its economic and social circumstances.³⁵⁸ A well-known song by another leading Uruguayan musician, Alfredo Zitarrosa’s *Milonga cañera* (1962) provides a good introduction.

*They call me “peludo” and I was born in Bella Unión
I’m one of those who could put fear into the boss
I’ve walked from Artigas to here
The whole way crying “Live Sendic and the UTAA!”
With my “china” and my “gurises” without bags to unpack
I came here because I wanted to; No one sent me
I came with another seventy and the government got scared
Figure it out; I didn’t ask who I am
Don’t get scared comrade if I look shabby
I like you am a worker; I don’t use an ironed collar
I’m just a “cañero” and I was born in Bella Unión
Count on me to show up for the Revolution!³⁵⁹*

³⁵⁷ A more accurate American parallel is Cairo, Illinois, the down-and-out town at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, and the farthest point in Illinois from Chicago.

³⁵⁸ An Uruguayan birding enthusiast confirms to me that Bella Unión is home to tropical birds that one cannot spot elsewhere in Uruguay.

³⁵⁹ Translation mine. “Cañero” is the general Spanish word for a sugar cane worker. In this corner of the world, the term “peludo” is often used instead. “Peludo” is a type of hairy armadillo (*chaetophractus villosus*) endemic to Southern South America. Working in a cane field requires a hunched back and it brings the sullyng of clothing with black sap, thus the analogy. “China” is an affectionate term for the *cañero*’s spouse. “Gurises” refers to the *cañero*’s children. An example of an Uruguayan and Argentine word drawn from Guaraní, “guri” (or gurisa in the feminine form) is used to describe children. Saying “los gurises”, can also refer to one’s group of friends, like the English say “the lads”. Raúl Sendic Antonaccio (1926-1989) was a lawyer and trade unionist who helped organized sugar cane workers through the UTAA (Union of Sugar Workers of Artigas). The visibility he gained from his activities in Bella Unión was an important factor in the rise of the Tupamaros guerrilla movement, which he helped found in the late 1960s.

Unlike in tropical Latin America, sugar cane production in Uruguay does not stem from the colonial era and European imperialism, but results from an Uruguayan government decision. Sugar cane was not grown commercially in Uruguay until 1937, when the ANCAP (National Administration of Fuels, Alcohols, and Portland Cement) began planting cane in search of alternative solutions for alcohols. At just south of the thirtieth parallel, Bella Unión and its famed heat was a suitable choice of location. A law in 1950 declared “the cultivation and industrialization of saccharine species of national interest”. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, sugar cane raising and processing in Bella Unión was a prime example of the import substitution industrialization tide sweeping Uruguay and the region. Such domestic-led growth had its limitations in an economy that began to stagnate after the windfall of beef and wool profits petered out, following strong exports during World War II and the Korean War, and after much of Europe had begun to recover thanks to the Marshall Plan. In 1961, a United States group purchased the land and factory run by the CAINSA (Agricultural and Industrial Company of the North). “Los gringos de CAINSA” oversaw the planting of 10,000 hectares of sugar cane, but the pain of foreign-owned capital and the state of labor relations did not sit well with Uruguay’s growing left. In 1962, Sendic and the UTAA led a march on Montevideo and organized a four-month occupation of the factory in Bella Unión, hence the sympathy from Zitarrosa, Uruguay’s most internationally renowned exponent of *nueva canción*. The UTAA and the *peludos* would strike and march four more times before the advent of Uruguay’s dictatorship in 1973.

Ingested into the body, sugar gives you highs and crashes. Ingested into a local economy, it can do the same. Bella Unión, whose economy had run on sugar cane for decades, succumbed to these vicissitudes and became a battleground for differing political visions of Uruguay. In 1991, MERCOSUR was formed with the four neighboring countries Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay,

and Argentina as its founding members. Now having closer trading partners for whom growing sugar was significantly more efficient, Uruguay's ensuing *blanco* and *colorado* governments both declared domestic sugar cane production a lost cause for alimentary and fuel needs. The loss of this livelihood base and the Southern Cone financial crisis of the early 2000s left Bella Unión in a dire state.

In Las Láminas, an informal settlement on Bella Unión's outskirts, unemployed seasonal sugar workers built shacks from cardboard and nylon, and their children who were fed during the week by state-run daycares, could only muster a cup of powdered milk for their daily intake on weekends. Infant mortality rates were the highest in the country. In Uruguay—José Batlle y Ordóñez's *mesocracy* and Switzerland of South America—this level of misery was not just unacceptable, but it was incomprehensible. Las Láminas received attention from Uruguayans as far away as Sweden, where the Casa Uruguay-Suecia of Malmö sent a donation of 27 beds and other medical supplies.

When the Frente Amplio came to power in 2005, president Tabaré Vázquez had Bella Unión on his agenda, allowing cane to make a comeback. Besides the emotional appeal to locals who long associated work with sugar, this decision signaled a shift towards renewable energy, a policy which the FA continued to emphasize along its three terms in charge.³⁶⁰ In 2006, ALUR (Alcoholes del Uruguay), a subsidiary of ANCAP, took control of the old sugar manufacturing facilities in Bella Unión. ALUR has sixty percent of the domestic sugar market.³⁶¹ Bringing

³⁶⁰ Over 90 per cent of Uruguay's energy comes from renewables. See: Ministerio de Industria, Energía y Minería (2023).

³⁶¹ The other forty percent of Uruguay's domestic sugar market comes from Azucarlito. Azucarlito also has a protectionist past and present, one with multiple incarnations, acronyms, and stakeholders. However, it differs from ALUR in several important ways, starting with the fact that it is a privately held company. Azucarlito is only involved in manufacturing, and it has not planted a single hectare of sugar beets since 1992, when it began importing with zero tariffs crude sugar from other MERCOSUR nations and refining this with minimum added value for the Uruguayan market. Back in the time when it did plant, it planted beets rather than cane, and did so not in Bella

sugar cane back was not just about creating economic and environmental value. The insertion of ALUR into cane cultivation and industrialization also spoke to the cultural and political aspects of the FA's nation-building platform as it attempted to integrate Uruguay's impoverished extreme north with the rest of the nation and state. The ALUR sugar found in bags at Uruguayan supermarkets, and in packets at coffee shops, is simply marketed as "Bella Unión". A stylized version of the *sol de mayo*, which appears in the upper left-hand corner of the Uruguayan flag is also displayed in the upper left-hand corner of this packaging.

In 2010, La Diez Publicidad, an Uruguayan advertising agency, produced a commercial for Bella Unión sugar. In this, Tabaré Cardozo, one of Uruguay's most renowned *murguistas*, sings over scenes of everyday life, ones with people drawn from a range of social status groups and from across the country.³⁶² None of the footage shows cane fields or factories, focusing instead on happy consumers and citizens. A murga chorus enters with the words "*soy de la tierra, soy de mi tierra*" (I am of the land. I am of my land). The commercial ends with a voice-over reading the text appearing on screen, "*Azúcar Bella Unión. Nuestro azúcar. ALUR. Hacia un país agrointeligente.*" (Bella Unión sugar. Our sugar. ALUR. Towards an agrointelligent country.) The murga chorus illustrates the desired connection between Bella Unión and Uruguay in the physical realm—the earthly act of planting sugar on Uruguayan soil—and in the political and cultural realms—*mi tierra*, as in my homeland—to show that all Uruguayans, as far away as they may live from Bella Unión, have a stake in this process. By consuming Bella Unión, you are consuming the nation, and by consuming ALUR, you are consuming the state. Through a simple act of branding, Uruguay's most remote place is both an essential good and a household name.

Unión, but a couple hundred kilometers south in relatively chillier Paysandú. Excessive costs, reduced soil productivity, and MERCOSUR have combined to spell the death of sugar beet cultivation in Uruguay.

³⁶² *Murga* is genre of choral music and theater commonly performed at Montevideo's Carnival.

Having heard for years about Bella Unión and its exotic yet pivotal place in the national psyche, this MEVIR *jornada* to meet with local leaders is my first chance to visit. Given the distance, I take a bus to Salto the afternoon before accompanying Teresa Sangiovanni, one of MEVIR's most seasoned social workers, along the journey there. The next morning, Salto-based social worker Paulina Sena collects us and we make our way out of town. Unlike farther south in Montevideo, the jacarandas are already in bloom. Spring is well underway.

Sangiovanni and Sena start talking about mutual aid hours in Cuaró, where the latter is currently leading the plan. Sangiovanni makes the insightful comment that *estancieros* are more flexible and personal with their employees participating in a MEVIR plan than factory or meat packing plant owners for example. The relationship is more family-like. They are more likely to know each other's offspring and to understand the history and purpose of MEVIR.

As we reach the outskirts of town, we pass a mural of soccer player Mauro Arambarri of Getafe CF in La Liga, who grew up nearby in a family of *chacareros* (small farmers). Within a half-hour drive of Salto, the landscape is full of greenhouses, small farms, and orange groves (this is the center of Uruguay's citrus production, and unlike in the rest of the country, it is common for bakeries and cafés in Salto to have freshly squeezed orange juice readily available). Some of this is for export. For example, a package of Salto-grown blueberries I once bought at a Montevideo *feria* (street market) was labeled in German, though much of the production is for local consumption.³⁶³ At over 100,000 people, the city of Salto provides enough of a market for produce. These sorts of market gardens have increasingly disappeared from the outskirts of most departmental capitals, where consumers derive more and more of their produce from Canelones,

³⁶³ A 2017 survey revealed that over 29 percent of the fruits and vegetables grown in Uruguay and reaching Montevideo's wholesale market come from Salto. Over 97 percent of all fruits and vegetables arriving domestically at Montevideo's wholesale market came from six departments: (in descending order) Canelones, Salto, San José, Montevideo, Rivera, and Maldonado. See: *La Hora del Campo* (n.d.).

rural Montevideo, or Brazil. Turning onto Ruta 3, the Central Hortícola del Norte, a wholesale produce market under construction that would open in 2023, stands to our left. In Salto's agricultural belt, MEVIR's imprint is evident, with nucleated plans in Albisu, Colonia 18 de Julio, Colonia Osimani, Garibaldi, and San Antonio, all of which are located within a half-hour drive of the center of Salto.

Sangiovanni asks Sena, who has only worked in MEVIR for five years, what things she wishes she had known or better understood before she started. Sena says that she would like to have had a better idea of who is whom in the office, what the differences are between programs, and keeping a register of things. Sena expresses that she feels like MEVIR is always under construction. Sangiovanni responds that living with constant change in the organization is the hardest thing for her and including for those colleagues who have been around for decades. The amount and frequency of organizational shifts that have happened in MEVIR since the Frente Amplio took over far exceeds what she experienced between 1989 and 2005, when MEVIR's organizational structure more or less remained the same.³⁶⁴ "Changes are never fully consolidated before they are discarded, thus the employee is always in a state of alert," she reflects.

Sena comments that the highway between Salto and Bella Unión shows every possible state from pristine to gravel. It is strange that the few kilometers of gravel appear to be under construction, yet there are no laborers visibly working on this weekday morning. All the arroyos we cross along Ruta 3 have indigenous names (Itapebi, Arapey, Yacuy), something less common in the south.

³⁶⁴ Sangiovanni's comments are not a political critique of either the Frente Amplio or the current coalition government and their visions of MEVIR, but rather an observation that the pace and frequency of changes (whether beneficial or not) poses a challenge for many workers.

Sangiovanni comments how at the meeting we need to insist that the sign-up is a “conditional inscription”. Your name will be put in MEVIR’s system, but that does not mean that you will get a house.

As we approach Cainsa (pop. 355) some 15 kilometers south of Bella Unión, the settlement for workers named after the sugar cane factory, we begin to see stalks of sugar cane lining the side of the road, which has fallen from loaded trucks.

As if the main economic activity in the area were not already clear, the semiotics of the state have their own local touch. The blue sign of greeting above the highway shows not just the name of the town in white block letters on a blue background (as it does everywhere else in Uruguay) but adds “Capital Nacional de la Caña de Azúcar”.

Before the meeting, we stop at the meeting hall of the APCANU, the Sugar Cane Planters Association of Northern Uruguay, where the sign-up will be held. Photos of cane fields grace the walls. We are greeted by a woman named Flavia. Though it was never mentioned to me as official MEVIR protocol, on every MEVIR jornada, technicians always ask locals first for directions before or instead of using GoogleMaps. Flavia explained to us that on the main avenue, it is hard to make a left turn. Thus, Sangiovanni, Sena, and I make our way to the municipal library for our meeting in an awkward way. Sangiovanni jokes how different this is to another such meeting she went to last week in the very remote paraje of Las Flores, Rivera, where the meeting hall was adjacent to the countryside, and only four people attended.

We arrive at the library and set down the map of the *llamado* limits, along with handouts about the *llamado*, on a large wooden table in the middle of the room. Anticipating a large crowd, we set up a couple dozen chairs in a circle. Ana Laura García was right that there would be more people here than in Chuy. When everyone settles in, Sena asks “*Entre ustedes ya se*

conocen? Trabajan? Coordinen?” (Do you guys already know each other? Work together? Coordinate with each other?). Murmurs of assent “si, si” fill the room. Twenty-two actores in total have attended. Most are between 25 and 40 in age. The CAIF and the municipality are the most represented bodies. There are five CAIF employees, including at least three social workers. From the municipality, there are two architects, a social worker specializing in child abuse, the head of social development, the head of economic development, and a nurse. Only a *maestra* is aged noticeably over 50. When the crowd finds out the time and date of the sign up, one *actor* notices that one of Uruguay’s upcoming World Cup games inconveniently coincides with the event. Another actor proposes putting a giant TV in APCANU.

Sena makes sure that everyone has a map of the *llamado*. Kilometer 619 of Ruta 3, the junction for the roads that lead to Salto and Artigas respectively, marks the southern limit of the plan. Martín, one of the municipal architects, says it will be important for locals to know that this is the landmark where the limits of the plan end.

Sena explains some important features of how the plan will work. Mutual aid hours are measured in weeks, and 24 hours are needed each week per household head. The times of day of the shifts depend on various factors, namely location and season. Mondays to Thursdays, there are two shifts of 4.5 hours, while Fridays see two shifts of four hours. The potential participants have to sign up themselves. They cannot have someone else do it on their behalf. Sangiovanni told Flavia earlier and now tells the group that people do not need to arrive early in order to get a spot. Here is an example of MEVIR technicians being as transparent as possible so that the signup process is accessible for participants. MEVIR does not want to generate anxiety and waste the time of people who would be camping out. What potential participants do need however, is to have all their documentation in order.

Sangiovanni and Sena explain that the five-year residency limit is a way of making the demand manageable for MEVIR. Bella Unión sees a fair amount of transiency, on account of the seasonality of sugar cane harvests. Sangiovanni and Sena highlight that health workers are important because they can tell MEVIR whether people have been going to the same doctor for five years. Another way of proving five years of residency within the boundaries of the *llamado* is bus passes, using for example those people who buy an *abono* (subscription) on a bus company for regular travel for school or work. Rosario, an accountant, brings up a case of a family living on their boss's land because they have no other recourse to a home. They live and work outside the *llamado* zone, but their kid goes to a CAIF in town. Are they eligible, she asks? Unfortunately, no becomes the answer.

Bella Unión has seen no shortage of public housing initiatives, not least after the financial crisis of the early 2000s. Paradoxically, social housing has also contributed to the proliferation of informal settlements around town.³⁶⁵ Why has this occurred? As one social worker shares aloud and another corroborates to me afterward, many families have sold the homes of which they were beneficiaries. Preferring the extra cash to the non-financial benefits of a government-built home, they choose to move back into informal dwellings.

The task of completing mutual aid hours will not be straight forward in Bella Unión. Henry, who works in social development for the municipality, adds a crucial bit of place-specific knowledge that will impact how MEVIR approaches construction. He notes that the lemon harvest will make it difficult for some families to complete their hours. Sena asks if this takes

³⁶⁵ My use of the preposition “around” rather than “in” is intentional. Morphologically, Bella Unión resembles most other Uruguayan towns. The original settlement is on a grid set around a central plaza. This area is where the town's middle-class families live, while poorer families and informal settlements congregate on the periphery. However, Bella Unión's center has fewer signs of prosperity, current or former, than other Uruguayan towns of its size. For example, any paved streets end at a shorter distance from the plaza and the main avenue. The contrast in infrastructure and social welfare between Bella Unión and similarly sized Dolores (see Chapter Five) is striking.

place around the same time as the sugar harvest, to which he says yes, adding that roughly between May and November, buses filled with seasonal laborers depart every day at 8:30 and return to Bella Unión at 18:00. Sangiovanni thanks Henry, saying that this is good information to have. Camila, who works for the MVOT and is dressed in a garish Brazilian manner, expresses that this kind of interchange will help to find alternatives and midway points. In a similar manner to how García warned in Chuy, Sangiovanni and Sena explain that *colaboradores* can only fill in some of the hours. A lot of the people who live in Bella Unión's asentamientos, one actor shares, will not qualify for the MEVIR plan. They come only for the harvest and live the rest of the year elsewhere. Beyond the matter of seasonality, multiple *actores* express doubts that many of the families with whom they work will meet minimum income requirements. Indicating the level of desperation in the area, a MIDES employee shares that this ministry receives at least three requests for housing per day in Bella Unión. Throughout the room, there is consensus that there will be demand, but that not all families will meet requirements.

After the meeting, Sena and Sangiovanni field more questions and have a more detailed meeting with a couple of the actors present. I take this as an opportunity to learn more about the *asentamientos* in the area. Jeferson, the municipal development director, Vanessa, the social worker with the municipality working on child abuse, another Martín, a nurse for the municipality who works especially as a first responder for 18- to 25-year-old drug addicts, and Darío, their driver, are kind enough to take me on a brief tour. My conclusions are incomplete, in part because the bumpy roads made it difficult to take notes, and also in part because I was hesitant to take photographs in some areas. What was clear to me is that this is the most serious poverty I have seen on all of my visits to the interior of Uruguay.

Jeferson explains that it is hard to quantify the number of people living in *asentamientos*, although he does say that a recent census revealed twenty-two of these in total (this figure contrasts with the seventeen that Ana Laura García had mentioned). The lack of any rigorous land survey plays its part in this, as does seasonality. In an *asentamiento* called La Aguja (The Needle), homes are given their house number by virtue of the order in which they were connected to the UTE electricity network. The haphazardness of the building materials is striking to me. Jeferson comments how people will build with anything. One house we pass uses multiple kinds of wood, brick, concrete, and metal. Part of the reason for this haphazard construction, they explain to me, is on account of a pattern of frequent flooding. Bella Unión sits on a flat peninsula between the Uruguay and Cuareim Rivers, and there are several small streams. As we drive through a large *asentamiento* of around six hundred people called La Via, so named because it is built along the abandoned railway that once continued towards Brazil, Martín points out a home that was recently burned down because it was a drug *boca* (den). This is a Thursday at noon, and lots of people across the *asentamientos* are simply sitting under their awnings drinking mate. Not all *asentamientos* are created equal, however. Granja San Antonio, past La Aguja, has homes in relatively better condition.

Sangiovanni and Sena had asked at the conclusion of the meeting where we might be able to obtain lunch. One of the municipal workers suggested a place on the main avenue. Bella Unión has a reputation for being inexpensive, partly on account of its proximity to Brazil and because of the lower standards of living. When we arrived at the restaurant, not seeing prices on the menu should have been a red flag, as should the fact that we were the only diners. When we sat down, the waitress handed us a platter of what she called “*comuncitas*”, small accordion-shaped pieces of bread cooked with beef fat in lieu of oil, similar to the *galletas* commonly eaten

in the Uruguayan countryside, only smaller. Sena explains that in Salto, they call what we have been served “*salteñitas*”, and Sangiovanni adds that in Montevideo and Canelones these do not exist (I can confirm that I have never been served these before at a restaurant meal in the south). The *comuncitas* were a welcome treat, but the *chivitos* we ordered were something short of special. Their mediocrity became more pronounced when we received the bill, one which charged us prices higher than what we would expect to pay in Montevideo. We suspected there was some form of kickback, where the municipality would lure outsiders to this locale and then take something off the top. Sangiovanni and Sena made a note to warn MEVIR staff away from this place when they came for the sign-up later in the month. This is the only time in Uruguay where I have, to my knowledge, been swindled. Knowing Bella Unión, however, this is not entirely surprising. The *alcalde*-elect of the town once openly admitted on a national television program to giving a sinecure to a family member and not seeing anything problematic with that.³⁶⁶ The state may have a strong presence here, but that is because there is an extra need to for this. On our way back to Salto, it occurs to me it is not a coincidence that Uruguay’s poorest place, and one that most resembles North American and European stereotypes of Latin America, has an economy based on sugar.

DISTRIBUTING FLYERS

Where possible, MEVIR organizes a separate *jornada* to distribute flyers and posters with the details about the plan so that families have all the information they need in advance of the sign up, and so that this information reaches as many families as possible. As Victoria

³⁶⁶ For the interview with the *alcalde*-elect, see ZIN TV (2020). Silvia Cuello tells me that on a separate visit to Bella Unión in 2024, the *alcalde* explained how it was difficult to stop *asentamientos* because people build during the night. However, on her tour of *asentamientos* with the municipality, people were clearly erecting in plain sight informal housing during the day, something that did not seem to bother her guides.

Morena, the selection director, explains to me, the idea of this trip is so that “no one can say ‘we didn’t know’ [that MEVIR is coming]”.³⁶⁷ In advance of the *jornada*, the MEVIR technician making the trip also reinforces their in-person activities by communicating the digital version of the flyer and the link to the webpage with the *llamado* via WhatsApp to various local *actores*.

Puntas de Valdez (San José), 17 June 2022

Today’s trip is shorter. The destination is Puntas de Valdez (pop. 1,491), which lies almost exactly an hour from Montevideo along Ruta 1 on the way to Colonia del Sacramento.³⁶⁸

Alejandra Mackinnon, who worked with housing cooperatives prior to joining MEVIR, will be the social worker on the plan, and she is traveling today to deliver the flyers. We leave Montevideo around 7:00 AM. In the car, she mentions a few observations relevant to the area.

People want either to live in the countryside and work in the city or vice versa. This has been an issue with the INC, which requires that *colonos* live within 3-5 kilometers of their plot. The *llamado* area for Puntas de Valdéz, includes multiple *colonias* that Mackinnon will visit. San José has more INC colonies than any department besides Canelones, and MEVIR has made specific interventions in a number of them. The plan will consist only of *area rural* and *planta urbana* homes to be built on land owned by participant families. Despite demand for a nucleus in a town that has not seen one of these for 27 years, MEVIR is unable to build here. Land, at \$30,000 to \$40,000 per hectare, is too expensive. Small-scale dairy production is the lifeblood of the area. But, Mackinnon has found that day labor in the respective harvests of potatoes, lemons, and strawberries is also an important source of income for many families. Mackinnon shows me

³⁶⁷ Interview with Victoria Morena, 8 June 2022.

³⁶⁸ Despite there being six MEVIR nuclei in towns along Ruta 1, none are readily visible from the highway. This contrasts significantly with Rutas 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 (Ruta 4 is not a major thoroughfare), where multiple nuclei are apparent to travelers. Part of this is the happenstance of where within the Ruta 1 towns the plans are located (i.e. farther from the highway), and part of it is because Ruta 1, as the primary road between Montevideo and Argentina, is divided highway for almost the entirety of its length, and bypasses have been built around the towns in question.

her notebook with the names and numbers of all the “*referentes institucionales*” (she writes the phrase in all caps) she will try to visit in person during the *jornada*.

Our first stop is Escuela 17 “Abner Prada” in Colonia Italia. It is sunny outside, but especially cold, and the ground is full of dew. This is not an ordinary rural school. Founded in 1945, it became the second *escuela granja* in the country. A brainchild of the pedagogue Agustín Ferreiro, *escuelas granjas* were a way of promoting vocational skills to children growing up on small scale farms, while also attending to their cultural development.³⁶⁹ The groundskeeper Eduardo gives us a tour of the School Museum in a house behind the building where the classroom is located. It is full of artifacts, including publications on farm mechanization. As none of the other school employees are there, we will leave the flyers with Eduardo. He lives in Libertad (10,166), nine kilometers towards Montevideo on Ruta 1, and he has worked at the school for 38 years. Eduardo shares unpromptedly more of his life story and the latest news in the area. He works six days a week and spends Sundays resting with his wife, in lieu of taking out his pick-up truck. His son lives with them and lives off *changas* (odd jobs). He tells us that yesterday a man killed himself in front of the school we will go to next, Escuela 44 Valdez Chico. Drugs were likely involved, which bring him to the topic of recreational as opposed to medicinal marijuana. Mackinnon and I listen patiently, and when the time comes to say goodbye, we leave the flyers.

Back in the car, Mackinnon tells me that this is why these visits are so important. “People will talk to you, and you need plenty of time to listen to them,” she says. Her point is valuable for understanding MEVIR’s methodology, not just at this stage, but across the broader housing

³⁶⁹ For more on *escuelas granjas*, see Ferreiro (1946). A relevant chapter is reproduced here: https://www.educacionrural.org/?page_id=2761. There are important geographic dimensions in this work, such as the idea that the schools are the group anchor for people of all ages within a five-kilometer radius of them.

process. This was far from the only time where I observed an otherwise laconic-seeming person open up unsolicited to a MEVIR technician. This pattern comes in part because MEVIR's prestige gives people a green light to share information. They do this perhaps in hope that it may help them gain selection. It also results from the trained disposition of the technicians to be patient and courteous, showing people how the things they have to share and to ask about are important. People like Eduardo are typical "*gente de la zona*" and the kind of people with whom MEVIR staff take care to listen and work to build trust. In many cases of MEVIR's unplanned interactions, the people with whom MEVIR talks, such as Eduardo, or the hotel receptionist in Chuy, may qualify as participants themselves.³⁷⁰

Shocked by the news Eduardo had shared about School 44, Mackinnon decides to head there nevertheless, because the *maestra* lives on the school grounds. When we arrive, Mackinnon calls to announce her presence. The *maestra* answers, but says she is sick. Mackinnon offers to leave the flyers under the door, but the *maestra* decides to send the *auxiliar*, Cecilia, to come outside and greet us. Cecilia has questions for Mackinnon about the plan, which she answers. When Cecilia is done with these questions, Mackinnon gracefully asks her about the suicide. She explains that the deceased was a man in his early twenties who had attended the school and had lived across the road (she points to the house). He hanged himself on the swingset of the school playground, where his mother found him. Cecilia says that the only silver lining is that because he killed himself at a time when classes were not happening and just before a weekend, the *maestra* and herself had more time to figure out how to use this as a teaching moment for their students.

³⁷⁰ I also believe that Uruguay's *mesocratic* social structure and mores lubricate interactions such as these in MEVIR in ways that are harder to come by in other Latin American countries, ones with more rigid class distinctions and codes enforcing the maintenance of social distance when people of different classes meet.

Once finished visiting the two rural schools, we head back to the town of Puntas de Valdéz, parking in front of the Junta Local, the office where the Intendencia of San José is represented in the town. Unlike the main street of most small towns, the buildings along what was the old version of Ruta 1, before the construction of a bypass, are well set-back from the road and they do not abut the sidewalk. Before entering the junta, we visit the polyclinic. This becomes the first time in months I have been asked to put on a mask. I pull out a KN-95 that has been gathering denim lint in a pocket of my jeans. MacKinnon does not have one, so the staff kindly give her a blue surgical mask. Mackinnon knew to ask for a young nurse named Ana Curbelo. Ana does most of the talking, though she is flanked by two older woman helpers whose contributions to the conversation are mostly limited to asking questions about how the MEVIR plan might address their specific family situations. Ana is especially proactive as she tapes a flyer on the window during our conversation. Before we leave, I ask Ana whether she is a relative of “el Pollo” (the Chicken) Curbelo. She breaks character and blushes heavily. “*Soy la hija*” (I’m his daughter), she says. I explain that the MEVIR architect Federico Becerra told me to ask for him and to send his regards. Becerra mentioned that “el Pollo” was a vital cog in the apparatus of MEVIR, but he did not share any more, as if it was my mission to find out. I ask Ana who is her father? She replies that he worked for many years in MEVIR as a blacksmith. MEVIR builds social connections across the country, ones which extend far beyond simply building specific types of homes for certain types of people.

Our visit to the junta involves the most details. We talk to Luís, who heads the office, and to Adriana, the administrator. Amongst the important things we learn here is that lots of people listen to a particular radio station based in nearby Libertad. Luís and Adriana suggest it will behoove MEVIR to have Juan Pablo Delgado provide an interview, though he should do this no

earlier than a week before sign-up. Were an interview to be aired too far ahead of time, locals will forget about it. Luís and Adriana would like extra flyers to take to highly frequented businesses, such as Redpagos, because people will pay more attention to these there.

Our last visit before lunch is the non-rural grade school, which is across the road from the junta. Fabiana, the principal, wearing her white tunic over a salmon-colored fleece, attends to us directly and kindly. She asks questions based not on her own interests but on those matters about which vecinos have asked her. The most common question is whether there will be a nucleus? She gives specific examples of some families and asks whether they will qualify? Mackinnon gives a detailed answer explaining the procedure. As in the other meetings, the question of boundaries arises, a subject on which, Mackinnon expresses, MEVIR finds the need to remain rather strict.

THE CALL FOR APPLICANTS

In preparation for the sign up, MEVIR posts its call for applicants on its website, sharing information also through the diffusion tours described above. I have reproduced below a general template of MEVIR's call for applicants, in order to help situate better what happens at sign up, and who, exactly, is eligible to participate.

“To Whom is this directed:

-Applicants to the types of housing offered in the plan

Dates, time, and location of sign-up

Requirements:

-Age. Participants must be 21 years or older, except for 18- to 20-year-olds who have dependents.

-Proven housing necessity

-Link to the area. Participants must have lived or worked within the geographical bounds of the plan for at least a set number of years uninterrupted counting backwards from the sign up. This is usually five years.³⁷¹

³⁷¹ Silvia Cuello comments that the basis for the vast majority of families signing up is because they have lived within the zone, rather than only having worked within it while living elsewhere (interview 25 October, 2022).

- Income. Household income must fall between a minimum and maximum amount.³⁷²
- (for *terreno propio* applicants) Property Title. Participants may work outside of the bounds of the plan, but their home must be within them.
- (for applicants to the nucleus) NOT being a homeowner
- Willingness to do mutual aid work and complete the required construction hours

Geographic limits:

MEVIR provides a link to a map that shows the boundaries from within which participants come.

Required documents:

- Photocopy of ID of all members of the household
- Photocopy of document proving marital status
- Proof of that they have lived in the area at least the minimum number of years required. School enrollment confirmation of children and paystubs of adults are the most common forms of this proof.
- Proof of residence at declared domicile (i.e. via UTE or OSE bills).³⁷³
- Photocopy of proof of ALL household income (examples are given)
- Photocopy of rent receipts if one is a renter
- (for *terreno propio* applicants only) Original and photocopy title deeds or documentation proving connection with the land, with the possibility of regularization in your name
- (for *terreno propio* applicants only) Photocopy of a current property tax receipt³⁷⁴

SIGN-UP DAYS

Inscripciones, or sign-up days, are the first stage of policy implementation where MEVIR technicians meet directly and purposefully with potential participants in the program.³⁷⁵ This first encounter between service provider and recipient is a chance for MEVIR to disseminate its core values. Families have been made aware of the plan through outreach efforts by MEVIR and local institutions, and by word of mouth. Families who believe they will be eligible, and who wish to participate show up at a large central meeting place in the town in question, usually some kind of social club. The decision of families to present themselves at this stage is a reminder that MEVIR

³⁷² For a March 2024 sign up in Tala, the minimum monthly income for eligible applicants was around 20,000 pesos (\$510), and the maximum around 65,000 pesos (\$1,700). Cristina Sienna tells me that the third Frente Amplio administration (2015-2020) removed a minimum income requirement, and that the current MEVIR administration has set their minimum income requirement with the idea that families who sign up will be able to make their rent payments (interview, 22 March 2022).

³⁷³ In Uruguay, the state entities that provide water and electricity are used as shorthand for the words “water” and “electricity” when referring to the paying of bills.

³⁷⁴ Translation mine.

³⁷⁵ As I note above, there are instances of unplanned encounters at earlier stages where technicians converse with people who are interested in participating.

is premised on freedom of choice. Applying for MEVIR is completely voluntary. MEVIR has done no recruiting of individual families. MEVIR offers a service, but it is up to families to decide whether that service is right for them.³⁷⁶



Figure 15: Prospective participants line up outside the Club Social Casupá in Casupá, Florida Department as they wait to be interviewed by MEVIR social workers (photo by author, 22 April 2022).

Significantly, the sign-up offers no guarantee that anybody will become MEVIR a participant. The majority of applicants are often not selected. Many families confuse signing up with being selected, so MEVIR takes extra steps to clear up this confusion.

There are two parts to the sign-up. First comes a presentation to the crowd by a MEVIR social worker about how the program works. A second part involves the interviews between MEVIR social workers and the prospective participants. These interviews generally take place in the largest possible space available. An example of the spaces used would include the dance hall

³⁷⁶ According to Cristina Sienna, rent payments are one factor in making MEVIR a self-selecting program (interview, 22 March 2022).

of a social club, where there is sufficient distance, and thus privacy, between each pairing of a social worker and any *postulante* (applicant). The social worker and applicant sit across from one another either at a table or makeshift desk. MEVIR sends a mix of office and field social workers to these events. For field social workers who travel regularly to construction sites not with other social workers, but with agronomists and architects, the sign up is an important time for bonding with their peers. The interviews last for around 30 minutes. The social worker fills in the data on a tablet, a technology only recently adopted by MEVIR.³⁷⁷ In addition to a series of questions which social workers ask about income and other social variables, families are required to present a variety of documents and sign an informed consent form. The selection director Victoria Morena comments that sign-ups can grow chaotic when people forget their documents and have to send them later through WhatsApp.³⁷⁸ In larger towns, completion of all of the interviews can take nearly a week. In more remote locales, a day will suffice. As social worker Elena Romero explains, sign-ups are long and they demand close attention. MEVIR needs the most and best information possible as it selects families and begins working with them.³⁷⁹ The social worker Silvia Cuello adds that she has no problem working extra hours when more families than expected sign up, even if it means traveling an extra day. In MEVIR, she says, “it is all about setting a good example”, so that people trust you and the process. After the sign-up days are complete, it is MEVIR’s job to confirm that families indeed meet the requirements and thus will enter the pool of candidates.

Casupá (Florida), 22 April 2022

³⁷⁷ Worry about losing data was an impetus for moving toward the use of digital forms. An example of how paper records could be lost would include car thefts, whenever these were robbed while still containing personal papers. During the pen and paper days, such a theft never happened, but social workers told me of one instance when a colleague had her briefcase open and some of the sign-up papers blew away in the wind. She was fortunately able to recover them.

³⁷⁸ Interview with Victoria Morena, 8 June 2022.

³⁷⁹ Field notes, 6 September 2022.

By the time Silvia Cuello and I arrive in Casupá, there is a queue around the corner of the Club Social Casupá. A few other MEVIR social workers, including Ana Laura García and an intern completing her social work degree at UdelaR, are helping to do the interviews, but Cuello makes the presentation. Once all the interested townfolk are gathered in the main room of the club, Cuello first introduces her fellow social workers, then adding most of those present in the room probably know about MEVIR because there are multiple nuclei in Casupá. Cuello begins a PowerPoint projected onto a wall. She has achieved this through the opening of a gold-colored curtain on a stage, one on which many cumbia musicians have performed during the dances that accompany the *raids*, events which are especially popular in the towns on Ruta 7.³⁸⁰ Chief among these musicians is Casupá-native Carlos “Chacho” Ramos, who performs at sold-out venues across the country. The PowerPoint presentation reiterates the information shared in the call for applicants. Cuello goes into depth about some of the points and she fields questions. One woman mentions how she cannot come for her interview on the date assigned to her by her ID number. Cuello’s response is constructive. She calls on the *vecinos* to help this woman and says, “mutual aid begins today”. This is a welcome transition into the rest of her presentation about what MEVIR is and how it works. She shows two slides that explain in clear terms the respective contributions of the institution and of participants to the construction process:

What MEVIR Provides:

LAND (in the case of a nucleus)

MATERIALS

TOOLS

MACHINERY

CONSTRUCTION STAFF

TECHINCAL TEAM (ARCHITECT, SOCIAL WORKER)

EXPERIENCE

³⁸⁰ Social clubs such as this one in Casupá, and Capilla del Sauce’s Club Social are important third spaces in Uruguay and Argentina that mark a center of social life for small towns and neighborhoods. Along Rutas 6 and 7, the clubs also organize the *raides* (competitive long-distance horse races) that are central to the local calendar. The dances accompanying *raides* take place in the clubs. See: Brandt (2015).

What Participants Provide:

-Work on the construction site. 24 hours per family per week.

-Participation in assemblies, working groups, and training³⁸¹

Cuello elaborates on these expectations, anticipating specific questions *postulantes* tend to have at these events. The time participants spend at assemblies counts towards mutual aid hours, even though it is not physical construction work. The income MEVIR counts includes all income generated by any household, both formal and informal, permanent and seasonal, through work and through welfare.³⁸² Construction work takes place for nine hours each day from Monday through Thursday and for eight hours on Friday. The timing shifts a bit seasonally, accounting for heat and sunlight. If you have children aged over 18, they can contribute hours, but please make sure they first prioritize their studies. After moving in, families will make 240 monthly payments over time and the amount each family receives in the form of a subsidy depends on various factors. Cuello also takes extra effort to stress how MEVIR's vision of mutual aid goes "*mucho mas allá que la casa*" (far beyond the house). She explains how MEVIR as an institution is the confluence of 55 years of experience, along with group work, accomplished both as a physical act of construction labor and a social act of team building, something that will serve participants long after they build their homes.

Two slides in the presentation outline the order in which MEVIR proceeds with information to be collected at sign-up and make clear to the audience that signing up is not the same thing as being selected. In the Casupá nucleus (unlike the plans in Chuy and Bella Unión),

³⁸¹ Translation mine.

³⁸² Cuello later mentioned to me how livestock are another example of income that MEVIR counts. Determining this form of income after a family signs up becomes the task of a MEVIR agronomist. This is especially important in poorer, remote areas, where home economics exhibit more subsistence traits.

a significant portion of the families will be chosen by MEVIR's traditional method of selection by evaluation, while some of the families will be chosen using the newer method of lottery:

Stages of the Selection Process

- 1) *The interview at the sign-up stage*
- 2) *Interviews at your domicile, if needed*
- 3) *Analysis of the information declared and documentation presented by each applicant with respect to the requirements put forth by MEVIR*
- 4) *Order of priority by socioeconomic situation of the applicants, and drawing, if applicable*
- 5) *Selection of slots by socioeconomic situation*
- 6) *Drawing of slots of remaining applicants who comply with the requirements.*
- 7) *Confirmation of the group of participants, requesting, if necessary, additional documentation and information, and interviews at home*³⁸³

Since he happens to be in the vicinity for the press release in San Ramón later that morning, Juan Pablo Delgado stops by to add a few words after Cuello's presentation. The interjection of the MEVIR president is not a normal thing at the beginning of a sign-up. But then Delgado uses a leadership style where he tries to be as present as possible with participants. He tailors his usual talking points about MEVIR to this stage of the process and to the place we are in today. Families who build MEVIR homes are "participants not beneficiaries" and through this process they will experience "*superación*".³⁸⁴ Delgado emphasizes strongly that the first MEVIR homes were built in Casupá, and that MEVIR is a social institution at its base, one in which social control leads to transparency. Cuello reminds the audience that MEVIR is not just for couples with children, but that single people and the childless can also apply. Delgado, thinking like a politician, adds that this is a policy of the new administration.³⁸⁵

As I discussed earlier, I did not observe any interviews with families, so as to respect their privacy surrounding personal and sensitive information. MEVIR's social workers have

³⁸³ Translation mine.

³⁸⁴ The word *superación* combines the meanings of overcoming, improvement, and achievement.

³⁸⁵ The embracing of the single and childless as participants by an administration appointed by a center and center-right government illustrates how changes in MEVIR do not always correspond to ideological stereotypes.

shared with me, however, the unfilled versions of a form used at sign-up, one that collects economic data about the participants.

A week or two later, Cuello on our way to the construction site in Capilla del Sauce, informs me on some of her findings from Casupá. A total of 113 families signed up, which far exceeded the expected 80 families predicted by MEVIR's territorial investigation of Florida Department done in 2017. Much of this rise in numbers has come from people signing up who do not have any children. Compared to Capilla del Sauce, whose economy is almost entirely related to ranching, Casupá has a wider variety of labor sources, work in olive harvests for example. There are even some people who commute to service-sector jobs in Montevideo. Cuello gives the example of a woman at the sign up who was concerned that she would not be eligible. This was because she had gone to work in another town for a month. The job did not work out and she did not even receive her wages. The woman worried she would run afoul of MEVIR's requirement of uninterrupted residency. Cuello asked her superiors to make an exception, which was granted in this case, although the general question remains of where to draw the line. Throughout the sign-up days, Cuello observed that the three-year residency requirement was the main filter preventing families from being eligible for the plan in Casupá.³⁸⁶

SELECTION

The holistic evaluation MEVIR uses to select participants from the applicant pool legitimizes the institution as a democratic and knowledge-driven process. The selection director Victoria Morena entered MEVIR around 2010, following having worked in the *Sistema Nacional*

³⁸⁶ Field notes, 3 May 2022. Cuello also notes that the current MEVIR administration changed the rules so that professionals with a university degree can become MEVIR participants. This is quite rare, but it does happen. It is important to note that primary and secondary school teachers received their training in tertiary institutes separate from Uruguay's universities.

de Áreas Protegidas (National System of Protected Areas), or SNAP, the Uruguayan equivalent of the National Park Service. Morena explains that the *inscripciones* are about getting as much data as possible so that the selection team can do a thorough job. The variables are everywhere the same, namely family composition, the material conditions of the home, and income. The selection team fills in a sheet where each family is given a score on each variable. The sheet automatically gives each family a tally at the end. As in the game of golf, the lowest tally wins.³⁸⁷

Selection involves tradeoffs, ones that highlight debates about who MEVIR should serve and how it presents itself publicly. The first trade-off is that between a family's current situation and where it may land ten to twenty years later. The Paysandú-based social worker Beatriz Sampayo comments how inference is a skill that MEVIR technicians need to maneuver. MEVIR operates first and foremost considering a family's current situation.³⁸⁸ A second tradeoff is that between transparency and technical credibility. This is at the forefront of debates surrounding the current MEVIR administration's cost-driven shift toward selecting more and more participants, albeit ones that meet the requirements, drawing people by lottery rather than by using a scoresheet. María Fajardo, the legislator who was a MEVIR participant in Palmitas, Soriano, argues that lotteries improve transparency. She asserts these are not the solution, though, because they detract from MEVIR's social vision and technical credibility. "If a politician says to so-and-so that they gave you a MEVIR home", Fajardo remarks, "they are lying. It is MEVIR who

³⁸⁷ Interview with Victoria Morena, 8 June 2022.

³⁸⁸ Interview with Beatriz Sampayo and Mike Brennan, 15 July 2022. In the same interview at his Salto home, Brennan, the retired agronomist reflects on selecting participants for Unidades Productivas and *area rural* homes. Family dairy operations can be *esclavizante* (enslaving) because milking is an all-consuming task, Brennan comments, but some of the people immersed in it do not realize that. Brennan has had to deter some people from working in *tambos*, the Southern Cone term for a milkyard and one deriving from Quechua. As a technician, Brennan says that his job is to ask people why they need help from MEVIR and what are their priorities?

selects”.³⁸⁹ Regardless of the relative weight of using the scoresheet system versus the lottery, MEVIR’s selection of participants is a technocratic decision. It is not the result of handpicking by political appointees. There is a third tradeoff which is related to the first one. This is about choosing families with the most acute need for a MEVIR home, as against the families who are most likely to succeed in the program by completing their construction hours and making their rent payments. These groups are not, granted, mutually exclusive.

The use of a *sorteo* (drawing) to select some, and, in certain cases, most of the participants in a plan is a policy of the current MEVIR administration. A drawing accomplishes four things that MEVIR’s traditional selection method did not. It cuts costs by making the selection process less labor intensive. It brings the emotions of families into the public sphere, when they find out they will participate. It is another instance when MEVIR, the Montevideo-based institution, can mark its presence in the interior. And it makes its decisions transparent. In the traditional method, there are many variables involved, and these decisions can be hard to explain to the target population.³⁹⁰

In plans where a portion of the families are chosen by the traditional selection method, MEVIR makes visits to those who are the most vulnerable, and thus with the lowest point tallies, in order to confirm their selection. The remaining families go into the lottery, and the social worker for the plan will visit those families drawn to vet them.³⁹¹

While the use of a lottery is an important political tool to show transparency, notions of fairness are still subjective. One MEVIR social worker comments to me that it is not fair for a 40-something single mother with several children to have the same chance to participate as a

³⁸⁹ Interview with María Fajardo, 27 July 2022.

³⁹⁰ One MEVIR employee commented to me privately that selecting people in a lottery is more likely to make them grateful for the opportunity. However, the high number of families in Castillos who dropped out defies that logic.

³⁹¹ Interview with Yamila Meseguez, 4 April 2022.

childless 23-year-old. The latter, even when incomes are held equal, will have more opportunities to improve their life project. Social workers have also brought up to me the fact that dividing the participants into two socioeconomically different camps at the selection stage is a hurdle towards building group unity.

Castillos (Rocha), 14 March 2022

At 1 PM, I arrive at the MEVIR office to meet Leonardo Castro, Delgado's political secretary, Carina Folle, MEVIR's communications director, and Michael Rodríguez, who works in its IT sector. We load items for the lottery into the trunk of a Volkswagen rental car, including cookie jars full of ping pong balls and painted with numbers, as well as a lottery machine. Around halfway into the three-and-a-half-hour trip to Castillos, we call in for *biscochos* at a bakery Castro deems a mandatory stop in the aptly named town of Pan de Azúcar (meaning, sugarloaf). An hour or so of driving later, a shift in the landscape signals that our arrival in Castillos is imminent. We have reached the southern limit of the *butia odorata* species of palm, which now dot the pastureland. Though not many are open on this Monday afternoon, there are roadside stands along Ruta 9 selling liquors, jams, and other goods made from the fruits of the *butiá*. Rocha is Uruguay's only department to include a palm tree in its flag.

Besides *butiá*, Castillos is known for a few other reasons. In order to reach Punta del Diablo and those beaches even further north in Rocha, you must go through Castillos. Fans of *El Cuarteto de Nos*, arguably Uruguay's most internationally successful musical group, will recognize Castillos as the setting of the music video for the rock band's 2009 hit "*Miguel Gritar*". On a sourer note, the town is often associated with consistently having Uruguay's highest suicide rate.³⁹²

³⁹² *El Observador* (2016).

We set up for the event in front of the municipal *junta*. Victoria Morena, who has arrived separately following a weekend at the beach, takes the ping pong balls out of a large cookie jar and places them in numerical order into egg cartons, what Uruguayans and Argentines call a *maple de huevos*. Castro, Rodríguez, Folle and I make sure that the two MEVIR banners we have brought are standing up straight between the building and a long table the *junta* has given to us on which the lottery will be conducted. The street block has been closed off. In its middle, several dozen plastic chairs have been placed for attendees, covered in part by a green awning to block the late afternoon sun.

As the event begins, Delgado is the first to speak. On account of the pandemic, this is only the second *sorteo* held as an in-person event. He highlights the importance of notarial social control of lotteries, that the LUC has allowed MEVIR to build in a town of this size, and that childless families will be eligible. “*MEVIR es una herramienta comprobada y válida*” (MEVIR is a proven and valid tool), he concludes.

After the *alcalde* says a few words, the Intendente of Rocha, Alejo Umpierrez speaks. A lawyer by training, Umpierrez has a friendly and joking demeanor, and a resting wry smile. In his speech, he invokes Gallinal and the slogan about seeing it rain from inside without getting wet. “MEVIR is the most beautiful social policy in this country across many years, and to have MEVIR in Castillos is a dream”, he proclaims. Umpierrez highlights that the plan in Castillos is a win-win agreement between MEVIR and the ASSE on account of the latter having donated the land. The 56 homes being built will cost four million dollars. Given this outlay, it is important, he emphasizes, for citizens to know which parts of the state are involved in what. In his capacity as Intendente, he announces that he will fight for a MEVIR plan in Chuy within the next Rendición de Cuentas.



Figure 16: Being selected in a lottery to participate in MEVIR elicits an embrace of joy. Castillos, Rocha Department (photo by author, 14 March 2022).

Victoria Morena's speech is decidedly more technocratic and less political. She announces that Alejandra Mackinnon will be the social worker for the plan and Alejandro Guttds

the architect. She explains the process for the lottery. A total of 22 families of greater vulnerability have already been selected as participants by MEVIR and interviewed by Mackinnon to confirm their participation. The remaining families drawn today will be visited by Mackinnon later. There will be a wait list in case some of the selected families cannot complete the work. This waitlist will be based on MEVIR's scoresheet system. After explaining that families will make monthly rent payments across 20 years, she reads the names of the pre-selected households. Nineteen of these have dependents, while three do not. For the 79 families who await one of 29 spots today, there will be two separate lotteries. One of these lotteries will be for 24 slots of families with dependents, and another organized for five slots for those without. As Folle places each ping pong ball into the lottery machine making sure that the numbers are visible to the audience, the supernumerary law notary for Rocha Department reads the names of each of the eligible families.

When families are chosen, the notary highlights the names on her printed sheet. After all have been announced, she reads them aloud to confirm. There is a round of applause for each family chosen. And in some cases the selected families present break down in tears of joy. On more than one occasion, Umpierrez comes forward to congratulate families with a hug. At the last number, the notary exclaims "que emoción" (what emotion). Delgado concludes by saying that MEVIR will continue to look for more land on which to build a second nucleus.

Casupá (Florida), 30 June 2022

The second drawing I attended proceeded similarly to the first. Seeking to avoid repeating the procedure, I will limit myself to recounting a few details of interest.

Public MEVIR events are full of ritual and contain their own material culture. The municipality of Casupá has brought in an actual ovenbird nest attached to part of a tree and

placed this in front of the table where the lottery takes place. The branches are decked with ornaments specific to the day, and a card perched above the nest contains a motivational message for applicants, “Don’t abandon your dreams. Use what you have to begin where you are.”

This will be Casupá’s fifth MEVIR plan. In a town where MEVIR is much better known than Castillos, this drawing was much better attended, with lines extending out of the door, and hardly room to move inside the municipality’s assembly room. As the families are being drawn, a man in the crowd in front of me, wearing a gray sweater and a black *boina* (the Basque beret commonly used in the Uruguayan interior, but worn here straight on top of the head rather than tilted to the side, as in France) writes the names down in a notebook.

Waiting around before the event, I chat for a bit with the *alcalde* Luis “Lucho” Oliva. “There is nothing bad about MEVIR. Everything they bring is good for the town”, he tells me.

During his speech, Guillermo López, the intendente of Florida, wearing a black puffer jacket, expresses gratitude for two things: local actors and the current MEVIR administration. He praises Delgado and his team for uniting the spirit of Gallinal (a fellow *blanco* from Florida) with the realities of the present.

In her presentation of the selection, Morena highlights the importance of transparency, but also notes that the waitlist is an internal document.³⁹³ When Morena says that MEVIR will likely be able to build more houses in Casupá, there is applause.

After the lottery, a journalist with local radio station Casupá FM 94.1 interviews a number of those involved in the procedure, including MEVIR’s supernumerary law notary for Florida Department, a woman with the surname Molinari. Molinari explains how she loves that MEVIR contracts her, because it is a different type of work than that to which she is accustomed.

³⁹³ Juan Pablo Delgado confirms to me later that releasing the waitlist would create all kinds of fuss and extra demands.

While MEVIR has some notaries in the office, for instances that require direct contact between participants and locally based notaries, the organization also maintains a supernumerary notary on call in each department. As much as any interaction during my fieldwork, my chats after such events with supernumerary notaries illustrate how MEVIR brings joy to people beyond the families participating in the process and living in the homes.

PREPARATION FOR CONSTRUCTION

Following the selection of families and the confirmation done by social workers, there are still details to resolve before the *obra* (construction) begins. Moreover, there is a set of challenges as families move from aspirants to participants.

While everything up to this point is before the *obra*, it is not until now that MEVIR technicians officially use the term *pre-obra*. It is at this stage that MEVIR's office-based architects, architectural assistants, and surveyors become involved, deciding, among other things, which of MEVIR's architectural typologies will be used for the homes, and what urban form the plan will take.

One variable in this process is the family composition of selected participants. Once families are selected, MEVIR designates the number of bedrooms. MEVIR has pre-established criteria about this topic.³⁹⁴ A family cannot just say they want a home office, or, as in an example given earlier, extra rooms for a brothel. Gender is a factor here. A family with a son and daughter will be given three bedrooms, but a family with two children of the same gender will receive two bedrooms.

³⁹⁴ Interview with Victoria Morena, 8 June 2022.

Once families are selected and publicly announced, they are convened to an assembly prior to the start of construction. Families participating in nuclei sign a contract with MEVIR before and after construction begins. The first part of the contract addresses their obligations in construction, and the second regards rent payments.

There is a waiting list, organized by *puntaje* (score), in case MEVIR finds more land at the last minute, or in case families drop out. *Renuncias* (dropouts) are not uncommon. Victoria Morena explains that there are both unhappy and happy reasons for families choosing to drop out.³⁹⁵ Among the unhappy reasons are families who realize they will not be able to complete the mutual aid hours, the separation of couples, deaths, domestic or other types of violence, or people realizing they do not want to make the rent payments. The happy reasons for dropping out include events like getting a better job in a new place, but Morena says that these happen less often.

THE LAUNCH OF CONSTRUCTION

Sauce (Canelones), 11 March 2022

It is not customary for MEVIR to organize a public event for breaking ground on construction. However, the launch of a nucleus of 75 homes in Sauce in March 2022 provided an opportune occasion for several reasons: the proximity of Sauce (pop. 13,019), at only 35 kilometers from Montevideo is about the closest a MEVIR nucleus could be from the capital; the size of the plan, easily one of the largest under the current administration; the political salience of the project; and the timing emerging from the pandemic.

³⁹⁵ Interview with Victoria Morena, 8 June 2022.

This was my first outing with MEVIR. As such, I was more focused on observing than with taking detailed notes. In the current *quinquenio*, Canelones is one of only three departments with a Frente Amplio intendente (the others are Montevideo and Salto. Rivera's intendente is *colorado*, and the remainder are *blancos*. Born in rural Canelones, Yamandú Orsi is the son of a farmer of Italian descent, and a history teacher by training. He is also widely expected to win the FA's presidential nomination in the 2024 elections. At the groundbreaking ceremony, various dignitaries use his presence as a chance to point to the multi-party nature of this event and of MEVIR in general. The participants, wearing their color-coded hard hats, pay close attention to the various speeches, including one made by a woman among their ranks expressing her gratitude for the opportunity to participate.

The most telling moment of the day, however, was not the *jornada*, but the scene I found upon entering MEVIR's executive offices that morning. The day marked the fortieth birthday of Claudia Crivocapich, one of MEVIR's two executive secretaries, and I had been instructed to arrive half an hour before the car left for Sauce in order to celebrate. In Uruguayan culture, no festive occasion usurps birthdays in priority and production, and the customs surrounding them transcend social classes. This is a country where Carnival (apart from Artigas and Melo) is more inside baseball and less of a party that spills onto the streets deep into the night. This is a secular country where Holy Week is officially known as Tourism Week and Christmas as the Day of the Family. While 24 and 25 December are days to spend with family, throughout that month, there are few signs of yuletide around Montevideo, either in public decorations or in music playing on the radio. This is also a country whose Independence Day (25 August) is celebrated with little fanfare, apart from parades in select places such as Florida, where independence was declared in 1825. The night of 24 August, leading up to the *feriado no laborale* (public holiday), sees

Uruguayans frequent bars and clubs, dancing to oldies in what is called La Noche de la Nostalgia (Nostalgia Night).

Crivocapich's desk was completely covered in decorations placed by her colleagues. Work stopped for almost half an hour, as employees from various sectors descended upon the executive offices and celebrated with tributes to Crivocapich's value as a friend and colleague, and a cake containing the vital ingredient of *dulce de leche*.³⁹⁶ Beyond following cultural norms, this expression of festiveness was a baptism for me into the workplace camaraderie and solidarity of MEVIR.

CONCLUSION

MEVIR takes place seriously. It does not simply gauge demand, buy land, and then build. MEVIR's repeated and iterative engagement with the places it intervenes prior to laying the first brick is both a method of working and a legitimating factor in the institution's prestige. This engagement consists mainly of knowledge gathering and relationship building. The meticulous nature of this effort is not possible without a variety of technicians contributing their expertise at clearly demarcated stages. Research, planning and selection have defined roles, but the knowledge generated by each spreads to the others. Place, as I use the term in the opening sentence, refers to a locality and to the cultural, economic, social characteristics that distinguish it from other localities. However, MEVIR, whether it realizes it or not, also takes seriously other core geographic concepts. Notions of territory figure in how MEVIR designates the boundaries for a plan. Considerations of space matter for evaluating the housing need of applicants and in where MEVIR will build plans within a town.

³⁹⁶ I know multiple Uruguayans who insist that a dessert, cake or otherwise, must contain dulce de leche.

Chapter Four

“El objetivo primordial”: Building a Place Together

An English translation does not do justice to the next stage of MEVIR’s placemaking and policy implementation. The Spanish word *obra* means both “construction site” and “work”, as in “a life’s work”, or “a work of art”, cognate to the French *oeuvre*, Italian *opera*, and Latin *opus*. In MEVIR parlance, “**la obra**” is both a place that is being built and the process through which that place is built. The obra is a technical endeavor with sufficient room for artistic interpretation, and it has multiple authors working in tandem. From the first assembly between technicians and selected participants to the final follow-up assembly after the homes are inaugurated, the obra is a flexible script. MEVIR technicians, skilled construction workers, and participating families work together to build homes while also building better citizens and neighbors. Remaking the built environment is concomitant with a process of social improvement. The first part of this chapter presents the building blocks of the obra as a physical space, as a process through time, and a cast of characters. The second half of this chapter runs chronologically through twelve site visits to an obra of 34 nucleated homes and various *terreno propio* solutions in the town Capilla del Sauce between April and December 2022.

INTRODUCING THE OBRA

Ombúes de Lavalle (Colonia), 28 March, 2022

My first visit to a MEVIR construction site provided a welcome introduction to some key points of an obra. This trip was not to Capilla del Sauce, but to the town of Ombúes de Lavalle

(pop. 3,390), home to 250 MEVIR nucleated homes, the most in Colonia Department.³⁹⁷ My guide was the architect Federico Becerra, with whom I would subsequently travel many times to Capilla del Sauce. Becerra, in his mid-forties, had a modest upbringing in the Cerro neighborhood of Salto and he began working for MEVIR in the mid-2000s.³⁹⁸ As has been customary of students who graduate from the UdelaR's architecture faculty, he took part in a round-the-world trip to see the buildings he had studied. During his visit to the United States, he learned the importance of a hearty breakfast, something that he says helps him get through long MEVIR *jornadas*.³⁹⁹

Thanks to experienced MEVIR technicians like Becerra who know the country inside and out, my journeys around Uruguay were vastly more stimulating than if I had traveled solo. Throughout the year, our long car trips yielded many meaningful conversations that contextualized what I observed on the obra and helped me interpret the landscape we passed. My notetaking began as soon as we left Montevideo and did not stop once we left the obra. With Becerra, our conversations varied but they kept coming back to a series of core themes: institutional memory in MEVIR, architecture and urbanism, the limits of Uruguay as a small peripheral country, the value of giving his daughters a well-rounded education, and of course soccer, a subject that provided no shortage of analogies for explaining processes in MEVIR.

As we near Ombúes, Becerra points out how the surrounding farms are some of the most expensive in the country, in large part on account of their soil quality. He surmises that much of

³⁹⁷ Lavalle refers to the Argentine general Juan Lavalle (1797-1841) who owned an estancia around what is now the town. The estancia was full of ombú (*Phytolacca dioica*) trees, which provide shade on the otherwise treeless pampa. Hence the source of the name of the town.

³⁹⁸ Both Luís Suárez and Edinson Cavani hail from Salto's Cerro neighborhood. Cavani's father Luis "el Gringo" was a distinguished amateur footballer in Salto's local leagues and made his living, as many in town, by bringing contraband from across the river in Argentina. Becerra recalls a young Cavani once showing up to his house in his father's stead bearing a delivery of basic goods.

³⁹⁹ Not unlike in Spain or Italy, a typical breakfast in Uruguay, at least in cities, consists of coffee with toast or a small croissant.

the land we see was bought by Argentines during the early 2010s soy and commodity boom.⁴⁰⁰

We park next to the centerpiece of each MEVIR obra, the “*galpón de obra*”, the large shed where the construction materials are held, and where the *capataz* (foreman) has his office. Becerra greets the capataz Martín Fajardo with requisite banter about the weekend results for Peñarol and Nacional. Becerra and Fajardo explain to me that the building items, such as windows, in the galpón are shipped periodically throughout the year, so as to not overstuff capacity. Fajardo shows me a notebook that he keeps of everything done on site during each day, which he will later give to Becerra in a final report.

Walking around the obra, where single-story houses are being built along a new (though not yet asphalted) right-of-way, Becerra likens MEVIR building sites to a “horizontal skyscraper”. Given the number of people moving in, the scales are similar, but in a perpendicular dimension. Instead of cranes, workers move materials along the ground. One such material is bricks. Becerra explains to me that the cost of MEVIR construction went up between 2005 and 2010 as two newly built cellulose plants raised the national market price of building, and the FA government approved the demand by SUNCA (the national construction union) for increased wages. When labor costs skyrocketed around 2007, MEVIR had to find ways to save labor time. In order to illustrate this, Becerra points to a shrink-wrapped pallet of hundreds of bricks, a cost-saving innovation. He explains that having the best rights-of-way for moving construction materials is vital, especially in a larger-scale nucleus.

A visual hallmark of a contemporary MEVIR obra is the different colors of hard hats used to distinguish roles. Demarcating them as leaders, the architect, social worker, and foreman wear white. The *oficiales*, or skilled construction workers, wear yellow. Participant families wear blue.

⁴⁰⁰ Another sign of the wealth of farming in the area is the quality and size of the hotel in Ombúes.

When participants cannot complete the entirety of their hours on their own, they can pay friends or family to put in hours for them. These are called *colaboradores*, and they wear green hard hats.

Becerra stops to greet a participant in his twenties named Diego, who recently spent a year in New Zealand on a government-sponsored exchange for rural workers. I ask Diego about his experiences. He says he learned a lot, “*pero no salgo más de este pueblo*” (but I am never leaving this town again), he affirms. MEVIR will allow Diego not only to have his own home in the place he wants to live but will also allow him to live in housing that does not depend on his boss, on whose property he is currently living.

Walking past *terreno propio* homes like Diego’s, Becerra comments how they allow families to move into their homes in less time (around 60 days of construction) than families who participate in a nucleus. Later, I ask him how MEVIR decides the order in which *terreno propio* homes are built over the duration of the obra. He answers that it is a combination of the order of signatures of the families’ notary and the request of the families based on their seasonal availability.

One of Becerra’s tasks in Ombúes today is to check on repairs that the construction team is doing to the foundation of an earlier MEVIR home. He contrasts this home with the houses under construction now where MEVIR first lays the *platea*, or concrete ground floor. The switch away from building on holes to building on solid ground took place around fifteen years prior.

With Becerra and Fajardo’s approval, I take the half an hour left before the obra closes for lunch as a chance to do some participant observation of construction tasks. All MEVIR construction is wet, meaning it uses water and needs time to dry. A basic task for participants with no experience in construction is the creation and application of a mixture of sand, water,

and portland cement that is placed carefully between bricks. Next to a giant pile of sand lies a wooden instrument with a sieve-like mesh netting of about one and a half feet by three feet in dimensions, with handles on all four corners. Becerra instructs me to take sand from the pile onto the instrument and *zarandear* (shake) the sand onto a smaller second pile that will be put into the mixture. He encourages me to get the finest grains possible. That way less air gets through the mixture.

Humidity is a subject that came up time and time again in my conversations with Becerra and my observation of his interaction with construction workers and participants. My sandshaking led him to remark on how everything in MEVIR's construction is about humidity. In MEVIR's traditional construction method, two full summers are needed to get the water out of the walls. Next to a house under construction, Becerra points out MEVIR's use of double brick walls, with the outer wall being laid vertically. He is not aware of other social housing providers that use this technique.

During the lunch break, we drive thirteen kilometers southwest along Ruta 55 to Campana (pop. 298), where MEVIR is planning to build, but is waiting for the green light from the OSE for the water supply. The first structure as we enter the town is a Basque pelota court. Over half of the town consists of 87 nucleated MEVIR homes. As in many MEVIR plans across the country, one of the streets built has been named Alberto Gallinal, in this case with the honorific "Don" appended. Next to the MEVIR-built polyclinic, the leaves on trees are finally turning their autumnal shade of yellow. Reflecting on small towns like these, Becerra expresses that one of the best things about working in MEVIR is that you get to know the whole country.

After lunch, Becerra has a series of administrative tasks to deal with. I use this as an opportunity to walk around Ombúes's second and third MEVIR plans, which sit in the shadow of

grain silos from COPAGRAN, a cooperative of farmers in the four Litoral departments of Colonia, Soriano, Río Negro, and Paysandú.⁴⁰¹ With hornero numbers in the 11,000s, these homes are old enough to have become sole property of their residents, and they are no longer in the hands of MEVIR. Two families have put up for sale signs, which include the phone number of a local notary, who also does real estate. Other families have taken license to modify their homes according to their needs. One has added a carport. Another has built an awning, in order to provide the space to store a motorcycle and to hang laundry away from the elements. A third family has rebuilt the columns and lower wall of their fence using a thinly-cut slate, colored in various shades of greys and tans that are in vogue. DirectTV antennas are ubiquitous throughout the neighborhood. Having a MEVIR home also facilitates entrepreneurship. One family's home doubles as a laundromat, another as a family-run take-away and delivery kitchen, a type of business common in Uruguay. A handwritten sign titled "YOUR LUNCHES" lists a WhatsApp number and the dishes that are on offer, namely various types of pasta, and heartier fare such as *pastel de papa* (the local equivalent of shepherd's pie), stuffed zucchini, and *canelones*. These are not cannelloni, as the name suggests, but resemble a savory thick crepe covered in a cream sauce and filled with either ground beef, vegetables, or ham and corn. Most of the homes have plants for decoration, and some for use, such as a patch of squash and a lime tree. Ombúes's *salón comunal* (MEVIR meeting hall) lies in a plaza that was built as part of the plan. At midday on a Monday it is deserted, but there is a sign indicating that the upkeep of this plaza is a joint effort between the municipality of Ombúes de Lavalle, the Intendencia of Colonia, and the Office of Planning and Budget (OPP), which comes directly from Uruguay's presidency. The variety of colors painted onto homes in this plan (and most plans around the country) is both

⁴⁰¹ Despite the fact that all of COPAGRAN's 850 producers come from these four departments, its headquarters is in Montevideo. In Uruguay, the Litoral refers informally to the areas adjacent to the Uruguay River.

striking and appealing. In all of the homes, the bricks are painted white, but each house has selected its own color of trim.

Back on the road to Montevideo, we pass a MEVIR plan in Barker (pop. 158), a town founded in 1901 adjacent to what was then a new railway station.⁴⁰² Becerra mentions how this plan was the work of his colleague Renata Coppetti before she moved into a supervisory role. MEVIR technicians associate *obras* with their artists, especially when those artists have had an influence on them, as Coppetti has on Becerra. Hearing MEVIR technicians recall who the architect, social worker, and foreman were on a plan as they travel through the Uruguayan landscape is like being around jazz musicians who listen to albums, and who can immediately tell you who was on the bass, keys, and drums.

Expressing gratitude to his senior colleagues like Coppetti and Ricardo Nopitsch, who often accompanied him on his first obra in Chapicuy, Paysandú, Becerra argues that leveraging institutional knowledge, both tacit and explicit, is paramount to the success of a MEVIR obra. He notes the great irony that MEVIR architects are extremely skilled at what they do, but because a MEVIR obra is such a specific task and MEVIR an idiosyncratic institution, the expertise of MEVIR architects (not least their knowledge of how to relate with the population of participants and construction workers from rural Uruguay) has little value outside of MEVIR, both domestically and abroad. Becerra likes to give the example that a MEVIR architect would have little idea how to build an apartment tower in the upmarket beach city of Punta del Este, but a boutique architect who specializes in such expensive residential buildings would be clueless on how to run a MEVIR obra.

⁴⁰² As the town's name suggests, this was an area of British settlement.

THE OBRA IN TIME AND SPACE

At the galpón de obra in Capilla del Sauce, there are two printed timeline spreadsheets of the obra, tacked to a Styrofoam board above the architectural site plan in the foreman's office. One timeline is organized by month, the other by week. The columns correspond to time, and the rows correspond to the different tasks that need to be completed. Each cell is filled in with the number of homes for which that task will be completed in the stated time frame. This gives a picture of the flow of the *obra*, and the order in which tasks need to be done. For example, in the nucleus in Capilla del Sauce, all *plateas* (ground floor bases) were scheduled for completion by March, with five to be done in each of the first three months of 2022. The final steps of the obra are the placement of heaters, the addition of kitchen and bathroom accessories, and the connection to the potable water network. For each of these tasks, the spreadsheet reads for seventeen homes to be completed in November 2022 and seventeen in December 2022. The spreadsheet also illustrates the timing of the different *terreno propio* homes to be built.

The spreadsheet is a flexible script for moving from start to end. In practice, there is a fair amount of hurry-up-and-wait that happens. This could be because an extended rainy front limits the team to indoor tasks such as lacquering wood in the galpón for several days, but it is also likely to be in response to bureaucracy. Not MEVIR's bureaucracy, as Hugo Javiel, the jack-of-all trades office employee in the construction sector, takes care to note, but the bureaucracy of other organizations with which MEVIR deals. Javiel, who grew up in Paso de los Toros, highlights how MEVIR weaves other institutions together. It gives them dynamism, by pressuring them to be on time. This is why intendentes, ministers, and other high-ranking officials make sure to be seen at MEVIR events.

While the sequence of some tasks are quite obvious (you do not install stoves before you have poured concrete), foremen do have personal preferences at certain points of the obra, where there is ambiguity in the order of tasks. Becerra likens the journey of the obra to a plane flight. The most demanding work is done at takeoff and landing, while the rest of building resembles a smooth ride. Having attended several MEVIR inaugurations, I can confirm the stress on the technical team to deliver a timely landing.

Sala Mieres, MEVIR Office, 4 April 2022

Back at headquarters, MEVIR holds Operational Planning (*Planificación Operativa*) meetings the first Monday morning of every month, in order to check in on the progress of the many obras going on around the country at any given time and to bring together leaders from different divisions.

The meeting I attended consisted of going down a *planilla* (list) of obras and determining that everything will be achieved on time. Different people chime in based on their experience and relation to each obra. Cristina Sienna is the leader, and there is little agenda other than proceeding through the list. Strong relationships are evident between the office-based workers with high positions in the construction division (Ariel Amen and the three leading supervisory architects Gonzalo Altamirano, Renata Coppetti, and Ana Fernández) and the field architects and capataces.

The main conclusion is that the flow of each obra varies depending on a variety of conditions specific to the project, not least the capataz, who while still reporting to the architect, is the boss on site every day. Amen begins by discussing an obra in Isidoro Noblía (pop. 2,331), near the Brazilian border in Cerro Largo, stating that different works have different paces and

that sometimes a good capataz can complete his work a month or two ahead of schedule.⁴⁰³ Altamirano adds that having the infrastructure already ready in Noblía helped move the obra along. Teresa Sangiovanni, representing the social workers, along with her colleagues Adriana Berdía and Adriana Sena, remarks that a recent obra in Cuchilla del Ombú off of Ruta 26 in Tacuarembó finished early. Amen describes the rhythm of a MEVIR obra as something that ebbs and flows, rather than being “*vamos muchachos*” (let’s go boys), an expression he uses to signal franticness.

Labor itself is a talking point in the meeting. Sangiovanni comments how different work teams have different patterns, suggesting that each capataz has their own approach to how they incorporate participants into the process. The average number of mandatory hours per family is 1,200, but in practice this is closer to 1,500, she notes. The extra effort of participants, both individual and collective can push the obra forward. Coppetti stresses that having as much infrastructure ready as possible beforehand is key to reducing the amount of work. Fernández signals the importance of the *zafra* (seasonal labor) when determining the flow of an obra. This will be especially important for the current plan in Castillos, she says, where many of the participants work summer jobs related to beach tourism. After expressing concern that the obra in Minas de Corrales would indeed finish in 16-18 months, Sierra says in truth and jest that these meetings are like a therapy session, where we all ask each other what our problems are.

Seasonality

Seasonal labor is an important factor in planning the flow of nuclei construction. It also matters for deciding when to build the homes of *terreno propio* participants. Becerra highlights

⁴⁰³ According to data from MEVIR, Tranqueras (Rivera) had the most homes in MEVIR nuclei, with 475. Isidoro Noblía was second, with 443, and Lascano (Rocha) third with 400. Source: MEVIR—Evaluación y Monitoreo (2022). On the impact of MEVIR in Noblía, see: Arregui (2012).

the case of Juan Colina, a 21-year-old *esquilador* (sheepshearer) in Capilla del Sauce who is building, through MEVIR, his own home on the edge of town, one with a priceless view of the surrounding countryside. Colina is a product of his place and time, but also of Uruguay's connections with the rest of world. When Becerra first visited Colina, he was shocked to find his home full of protein powder that Colina had ordered online, not exactly a typical foodstuff in the Uruguayan interior, nor a typical means of delivery. Colina works intensely for two months out of the year. In October, he shears locally. In April, he travels to Spain with hundreds of other able-bodied young Uruguayan men, an army of professional shearers trained to extract as much wool as quickly as possible.⁴⁰⁴ The other ten months, Colina trains to keep fit. The amount of money he earns through the two *esquilas* is enough for him to live comfortably the rest of the year, but not so much that his income would exceed MEVIR's maximum amount for participating.

Seasonality is a physical as well as human question. The mere fact of having a winter distinguishes Uruguay from much of Latin America. An Uruguayan winter has its own material culture. Certain words abound in the winter months. *Abrigarse* (to bundle up) is more likely to refer to throwing on many layers than to putting on a single high-powered winter coat.⁴⁰⁵ An *estufa de leña* (wood stove) in one's home replaces plazas and waterfronts as a gathering place, that is, if people are motivated to gather in the first place.⁴⁰⁶ The scent of these woodburning

⁴⁰⁴ On a visit to the town of Pueblo Lavalleja (a sheep-centered area) in Salto in April 2022, locals remarked of a temporary depopulation of young men. This phenomenon recalls the *golondrinas* (or swallows) who moved back and forth between harvests in Argentina and Italy over a century ago.

⁴⁰⁵ Layers that one can remove become especially useful on sunny winter days, a common occurrence, and one when temperatures rise temporarily at midday. Snow, it should be noted, is exceedingly rare in the interior of Uruguay, though temperatures on clear winter nights often dip below freezing.

⁴⁰⁶ In my observation, there is a pronounced social tendency towards hibernation during Uruguayan winters. Social activity is more concentrated in the warmer months, not least because outdoor *asados* and excursions to the beach serve as the default events convening families and groups of friends. In a Southern Hemisphere country, the fact that there are no major holidays during the winter exacerbates this seasonal social isolation. The winter break of the

stoves combined with humidity pervades the air in small towns throughout the winter. *Comida de olla* (food from a pot) consisting of meat and tuber-heavy stews becomes daily fare. Since MEVIR's calendar is driven by political directives, it cannot simply decide for all obras to start and end at the same date. Thus some obras span two summers, others two winters. This too means decisions for a *capataz*. Another factor that impacts how a *capataz* plans is the state mandated *licencia de construcción*, or construction recess, which lasts approximately three weeks after Christmas, and for a week during Holy Week.

There are additional reasons why obras also work differently according to place. As we drive to the sign-up for the San Ramón terreno propio homes in May, Silvia Cuello remarks that the ease of shepherding a group of participants through the obra depends as much on the strength of local institutions as it does on the geographical priors of the locale, such as economic development and regional differences. Citing difficulties she had with an obra in Ansina, Tacuarembó (pop. 2,712), she says that if the doctor fails to show up to the polyclinic, if the *maestra* misses class, it brings everyone down.⁴⁰⁷ Building materials are also not universal. Alejandro Sandobal, the head of purchasing and supplies, tells me that you simply do not build with *isopanel* (cellular concrete) in the north.

Sequeira (Artigas), 29 April 2022

A visit to Pueblo Sequeira (pop. 1,149) halfway between Salto and Artigas is exhibit A for place-contingent obras. Gonzalo Saralegui, younger brother of former Peñarol star Mario Saralegui, is a MEVIR architect based in his native Artigas. He meets me at the brand-new local

Uruguayan school calendar, the first two weeks of July, is not accompanied by any sense of occasion or festivity. MEVIR does not take these two weeks off.

⁴⁰⁷ Cuello's point is well taken. However, local institutional conditions are also part and parcel of the particularities of a place. MEVIR's vision of place does not just account for socioeconomic or statistical conditions. The roles of key individual actors and institutions help with little things that add up over the course of an obra. Institutions comprise people, and so too do places.

high school in a white pickup for an all-too-brief tour of the obra in Sequeira. Until recently, he explains, there was no butcher in town because everyone had lambs they could slaughter on their own. Livestock theft is ubiquitous and hardly regulated.

The current and prior MEVIR administrations have made significant interventions in Sequeira. These are not ordinary interventions, however. This is due to a combination of the lack of land titles (as most land is public land), and the desire of locals to live on lands that are informally theirs rather than in a nucleus. Sequeira has an unusual morphology for an Uruguayan small town. Rather than being compact, it is dispersed along a series of dirt roads that extend for a kilometer or two on either side of Ruta 4.⁴⁰⁸

This dispersal means extra work for the technical team and more challenges in the logistics of building materials. Saralegui shows me a few of the homes, some under construction, some recently finished. He greets the head of household as “*dueño*” or “*dueña*” (owner). Because of the lack of land titles, MEVIR has had to be creative. In most cases, instead of building an entirely new structure, it does what it can with the existing structure by refurbishing it and adding on to it.

Saralegui tells me how locals are skilled at building *ranchos* out of sheet metal, but that they suffer in Artigas’s sweltering summer heat on account of their choice of building materials. Parts of the Sequeira interventions are about correcting this.⁴⁰⁹ Another accomplishment of the Sequeira typology has been to bring bathrooms away from the outdoors and into the home.

⁴⁰⁸ The attachment people in Sequeira have to their dirt roads reminds me of “hollers” in certain corners of Appalachia. Ruta 4 does become an important thoroughfare at its northern most reaches, providing approximately half of the fastest route between Salto and Artigas.

⁴⁰⁹ For more explanation and visuals on MEVIR’s Sequeira intervention, see: Uruguay Presidencia (2019a) and (2019b).

Saralegui shows me a house built in two halves. Adjacent to the refurbishment, the sheet-metal structure that had previously been a home has been turned into a shed.

A CAST OF CHARACTERS

On our drive from Ombúes de Lavalle back to Montevideo, Federico Becerra comments that MEVIR obras need three things in equal measure: people, materials, and money. These are the three legs of the table, and if any one of them falls off, there is no table. The analogy could go a step further. Within the first category, people, there is a symbiotic relationship between a cast of characters. Without any one of them, the show cannot go on. On any MEVIR obra, there are four groups of people working in tandem: the participants; the foreman and his team of skilled construction workers; the technical team of architect and social worker; and MEVIR's division of purchasing and supplies.

Participants

MEVIR participants are the *raison d'être* of the obra. The houses, after all, are for them to live in, and for them to be proud of having built them. Participants enter the program as families in need of improved housing. Not only do they put in hours of manual labor, but they usually must take hours away from their regular work.⁴¹⁰ At all six MEVIR inaugurations I attended, the word “sacrifice” was front and center in the public speeches MEVIR participants gave about the obra. In exchange for this sacrifice of time, money, and physical effort, participants in return get

⁴¹⁰ In practice, MEVIR has no policy on how participants make up for lost hours with their employer. It is up to the participant to arrange such an agreement with an employer, though MEVIR social workers are available to advise participants on how to go about this. As MEVIR social workers explain to me, they see all kinds of scenarios. In theory, however, as MEVIR human resources director Gabriel Moreno explains, the MEVIR Law allows participants to go on leave for building. Nevertheless, Moreno tells me, MEVIR does not activate this clause as many employers of participants would simply say “take your leave and don't come back” (interview, 9 June 2022).

more than a home. They acquire a trade, a set of values, and trust that they can use the rest of their lives.⁴¹¹ The learning experience extends beyond tasks like bricklaying and sandshaking. It includes a host of practical things. Speaking about MEVIR, encompassing both the obra and the office, Hugo Javiel likens the institution to a school whose teaching mixes the tangible and intangible.⁴¹² Participants learn to follow orders and treat their supervisors with respect. They maintain a schedule and take care of the galpón as a common workspace. The foreman does not let participants leave until all tools and hard hats are hung up in their proper place. Ricardo Nopitsch comments how MEVIR changes participants' relationship with work and time.⁴¹³

The evening I interview Magela Vicentino at the house where she has retired outside the town of José Pedro Varela, Silvia Cuello joins, as I have just accompanied her on a *jornada* in nearby Treinta y Tres (see Chapter Five). Around Vicentino's *estufa de leña* and over *biscochos*, Cuello reminisces about a speech to participants in Chamizo where Vicentino exclaimed, "Why do we have hands? To be artisans!"⁴¹⁴ Two core ideas are implied by MEVIR's approach to what it means to participate in mutual aid construction. First, if you want something, you must work for it. Second, at least in the case of nuclei where participants do not know until near the end of the process who gets what house, you learn to work not just for yourself but for your peers.

During the obra, the process of being a participant does extend beyond being a cog in a wheel. As I will discuss in my recounting of visits to the obra in Capilla del Sauce, there are various moments where participants have some degree of agency. For example, most groups end up with a de facto participant leader, based on that person's personality and skillset. Groups also

⁴¹¹ Making steps towards formalizing a long-informal process, in March 2024, MEVIR signed a *convenio* with UTU that allows MEVIR participants the option to get UTU (vocational school) credit for the construction knowledge gained on the obra.

⁴¹² Interview with Hugo Javiel, 8 June 2022.

⁴¹³ Interview with Ricardo Nopitsch, 10 June 2022.

⁴¹⁴ Interview with Magela Vicentino, 22 June 2022.

get to vote on which amongst them form committees that deal with keeping track of hours and of liaising with the foreman. In other words, the obra is a site of group formation and of promoting individual abilities. Motivating all of this is the promise of a new home. Retired foreman Ramón Castro puts it simply, “*la casita levanta la persona*” (the house raises the person).⁴¹⁵

The Foreman and Skilled Construction Workers

Ramón Castro embodies the promise of MEVIR. Castro grew up in rural Paysandú in the 1950s and 1960s in a place known as La Tentación that consisted of “*ranchitos de paja y barro*” (straw and mud huts).⁴¹⁶ His father Francisco was an *alambrador*, someone who makes their living by erecting wire fences around ranches. Ramón completed only three years of primary school before joining his father working on fences, as well as laboring in other rural tasks such as collecting straw, taking care of horses, and cutting down wood. In 1977, with Castro in his mid-twenties and barely literate, MEVIR came to La Tentación. He and his first wife were participants. Castro reminisces that the prior owner of the land on which the plan was built, Alfredo Ferrari, made it easy for the nucleus to go ahead, insisting that MEVIR had to build if he donated the land. Today, La Tentación (pop. 137) is almost entirely comprised of MEVIR homes today.⁴¹⁷

Pedro Terra, a nephew of Gallinal, was on the local commission in La Tentación, and Castro’s performance on the obra stood out to him.⁴¹⁸ Several months after the plan in La Tentación, MEVIR hired Castro as an oficial, with his first postings in Carlos Reyles (Durazno)

⁴¹⁵ Interview with Ramón Castro, 10 November 2022.

⁴¹⁶ These paragraphs draw from my interview with Ramón Castro, 10 November 2022, with a few details filled in from my earlier conversation with his son Martín on 15 August 2022 on the obra in Capilla del Sauce.

⁴¹⁷ The plan in La Tentación also has very large lot sizes, a characteristic more common in early MEVIR.

⁴¹⁸ Castro notes that a disproportionate amount of MEVIR oficiales came out of the plan in La Tentación.

and Isidoro Noblía (Cerro Largo). In Noblía, there were around 65 houses with five oficiales and one capataz, and it took 18 months, Castro recalls. Once he started working with MEVIR, the need to count supplies and keep track of items on the obra helped him gradually improve his literacy and numeracy. By the mid 1980s, he became a capataz, with his first plan in Cuchilla del Guaviyú (Salto). On what was his final plan as an oficial, in Paso de la Puente (Rivera), the architect “Chacho” López Llano approached him and said “*che canario, mañana me contestás si vas a ser capataz*” (hey *canario*, tomorrow, you answer me if you are going to be a capataz).⁴¹⁹ Castro retired from MEVIR in 2016, citing both mental fatigue from keeping up with institutional changes in MEVIR and physical fatigue due to aging.

Knowing that Castro moved to Salto in his retirement, I make sure to contact him ahead of my trip to Salto in November. A critical mass of MEVIR employees had told me that meeting him would be valuable for my project and forming my own perspective on MEVIR. On the drive back to Salto from Bella Unión (see the previous chapter) with social workers Teresa Sangiovanni and Paulina Sena, I receive a call from Castro’s wife Elida asking if I would like to come round. Sena happily obliges to drop me off at Castro’s house. She knows Castro, not through MEVIR (she started shortly after he retired), but because, in “*el Uruguay de cercanías*”, a country where degrees of separation are few and far between, he lives two doors down from her grandmother near Salto’s bus station.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁹ The word “canario” comes from the demonym for Canelones, which was settled by many Canary Island immigrants, but it is used universally in Uruguay to address someone from across the interior.

⁴²⁰ The phrase “*el Uruguay de cercanías*” (Uruguay of proximities), invoked by Carlos Real de Azúa in his 1964 *El impulso y su freno*, is used in general Uruguayan parlance. See: Real de Azúa (1964). It refers to the geographical, social, and cordial closeness common in Uruguay. It implies that between any pair of Uruguayans, there are likely few degrees of separation, even when accounting for differences in social class. This contrasts notably with other nations in Latin America (and Europe at the time Uruguay received mass immigration from that continent) with more marked social hierarchies and greater differences in incomes between the rich and the poor. Federico Becerra provides me with an example of the how a foreign visitor to Uruguay was introduced to this idea of *cercanías*. A friend visiting from Chile was shocked that Becerra found it normal to exchange life updates, let alone pleasantries, with the doorman of his apartment building.

Castro is tall and strong, sporting a moustache and round glasses. Perceptive, he opens up progressively over the course of our conversation, inserting more and more jokes and more and more idiomatic expressions more easily intelligible to canarios than to people from Montevideo. Uruguay's squad for the 2022 World Cup has just been released and during the entirety of my visit, the reaction plays out on the TV in their living room. "Looking for a capataz is like looking for a captain", Castro says as an interview with Federico Valverde runs in the background, and in MEVIR "*se arma cuadro*" (you build a team).

Building this team requires a specific set of qualities. Early in our interview, Castro emphasizes how his father taught him the importance of taking responsibility for your actions. "Once, or else", Castro says, looking at me very seriously, as if to test me. "Being a capataz is a big responsibility", he says, referring to the big picture of managing the obra over an extended period. But a capataz also must "take responsibility" in each and every moment of the obra to "command respect" from everyone who comes on site. Doing so means having a "*voz del mando*" (voice of authority). How you speak matters, but so too does how you listen, especially because mutual aid construction is more complicated than normal construction thanks to the involvement of the participants, Castro notes. "*Tenés que tener las orejas abiertas*" (you have to have your ears open), he says while extending his ear with his hand. Filtering the bad things you hear is a skill you learn on the obra. If you get bogged in gossip, you get bored of your teammates, he says. When you have something good or bad to say, say it directly to their face, insists Castro. "You say '*m'hijo venís*' (come here *m'hijo*) and you put them straight."⁴²¹

When discussing his communication style, Castro emphasizes that MEVIR is a set of connections between people. As a capataz, you "try to understand people", and "tolerance is

⁴²¹ Literally meaning "my son", "m'hijo" is a term of endearment that also marks authority or seniority.

important”. A capataz needs to take participants seriously but having *chispa* (wit) helps “get the truth out of people”. “One joke will get you there”, he asserts. Castro reminds me that a capataz and his oficiales are working with people who do not know how to work. Participants “start the obra with fear”, and it is “my job to turn them into teammates” and get a return on their effort. A capataz “needs to give everyone possibilities”. Some participants may be more skilled than others, but “everyone has their place” where they create value on the obra, and it is up to the capataz to recognize this.⁴²² In order to find what one’s place is, it is also important to give participants different tasks over time, he adds.

For Castro, in order to take responsibility on an obra, you need the support of the field architect and social worker. Support in this case is also a willingness to share knowledge. He highlights how he learned a lot from architects, especially López Llano who recommended him to become a capataz and “taught him like a son”, explaining technical-material concepts such as how to level streets. He also expresses gratitude towards Invernizzi, a Salto-based architect who taught him about “*el oído abierto*” (having open ears), and the value of being “*humano y familiar*” (human and family-oriented).

Responsibility also trumps money as the concern of a capataz. “*No es tema del bolsillo*” (It’s not a question of your pocket), Castro says, “you have to be disinterested in money. A good capataz thinks about responsibility, not money. It’s the day-to-day and how you treat people [that motivates you].” Your job is to “get the best out of yourself and others”.

Having worked all over the country, Castro is well-attuned to the place specificity of MEVIR interventions. Unlike architects and social workers who only visit the towns they work

⁴²² Castro warns that it is easier to teach participants to become oficiales than it is to teach oficiales to become capataces. “Sometimes you have to tell them off”, he says. Castro only recommended around three oficiales to become capataces during his three decades as a capataz.

in, capataces actually live in them. “As a capataz, you have to adapt to the places you go. In each *pueblo* you will be an authority, and you will need to adapt your authority to them. In some towns people are nicer. In others, they see you as a ‘*sapo en otro pozo*’ (toad from a different hole)”. Reflecting on the variety of work, Castro concludes, “*no hay dos obras iguales*” (no two obras are alike).

Though I did not know it when I first saw them, the houses that convinced me to study MEVIR are Ramón Castro’s work. He was the capataz for the 96 homes on the east side of Cerro Chato, working alongside architect Jorge Franco and social worker Alicia Barrios. “On an obra that big, there are so many people. It was dark with people,” Castro laughs, adding that “you also have to walk around a lot more.” He points out that he likes larger obras, because in the mutual aid process, there are more people to motivate, more people that might stand out, and more people that can reinforce each other’s learning and hard work.⁴²³

Adapting to the particularities of a locale is not the only challenge that comes with moving every eighteen months. That Castro is self-admittedly “*inquieto*” (restless) has helped. The responsibility incumbent on a capataz also impacts their lifestyle away from the obra. “A capataz has to live with moderation”, says Castro, noting that if the townspeople see you engaging in vices, it is harder for you to train them. Castro emphasizes that capataces need a lot of support from their partner, and that he has seen capataces, especially young ones, struggle without this. Referring to a very isolated place in rural Salto, he remarks that “women don’t usually want to live in places like Cerros de Vera”. Elida, who is with us seated on the couch, expresses that, she is not one of those women, thankfully for Castro. She met Ramón, already divorced from his first wife, when he was the capataz for a plan in Colonia Itapebi, a town nearly

⁴²³ Castro’s points about scale coincide with Magela Vicentino’s observation (interview, 22 June 2022) that the size of the town was a more important factor in how she approached a plan than regional differences.

an hour east of Salto, and one consisting entirely of MEVIR homes. Elida, who is from the area, and has a fondness for the campo, recognized him from waiting with his kids at the bus stop. Elida, who throughout our conversation affectionately refers to her husband as "Ramoncito", reminisces that she enjoyed moving, and loved the people she met in the towns to which MEVIR took them.

Castro's vision lends credence to the notion that a MEVIR obra is an "obra" in the sense of a work of art. "I always accepted the orders of MEVIR, but the obra was always mine," he notes, adding that it was also "not my job to *meter* (meddle) in the obra of another capataz". Working as a capataz means making lots of decisions in the moment. As the highest authority figure with a daily presence on the obra, Castro says in truth and jest that "on the obra, you were the capataz, the architect, and the president of MEVIR. You had to do everything." As such, attention to detail is paramount. "You have to scan the whole obra for details and tie up the ends". Nevertheless, there are limitations and a capataz learns to pick and choose when and where to intervene. "The capataz does not have time to train everyone, and oficiales do not have time to run behind the capataz like a puppy all the time," Castro says. As a capataz, "you are the thermometer of the obra. You need to know when to demand more and when to put on the brakes." Castro is attuned to the ebb and flow of the obra. He gives the example that when you are finished putting up the walls, you have more people to work with on other tasks. He uses a phrase that I heard time and time again from MEVIR participants reflecting on how they get through the obra, "*no bajar los brazos*" (to not lower your arms), an idiomatic way of saying "don't give up" that captures the type of work necessary on an obra. Like a good work of art, an obra, minus the galpón, will be there once it is finished. But in the world of MEVIR, so too will

many of the people with whom you built it. “When you visit”, Castro says, “you want people to hug you.”

Having witnessed MEVIR’s impact firsthand in dozens of localities, Castro reflects on the value of the institution on a national scale. In the rural interior, “no one has generated the impact MEVIR has, and no one else will.” MEVIR has “served the campo a lot.” He does, however, point out a considerable limitation of MEVIR. His quote I cited earlier that “the house raises the person” has a caveat. It is too often the case that “after 8-10 years, your kids have to move away to study”, and having seen new horizons, they do not come back. This is something, he hints, that MEVIR could think about more in its planning.⁴²⁴

For Castro, MEVIR is also a family affair. His sons Martín and Matías are also capataces. Martín started in MEVIR at age fifteen while his dad was working on a plan in Cerro Pelado (Rivera) in the early 1990s. He was hired as a peon to help build cesspits. Since then, he has lived and worked with MEVIR in every department save for Rocha. His commitment to the institution is evident when he tells me that he would work for free for a while if MEVIR ever came on hard times. Martín was a capataz for eleven years before being appointed MEVIR’s first “*capataz general*” in early 2022. He is based in Santa Rosa (Canelones), which gives him the quality of life he is used to in small towns but places him close enough to Montevideo for frequent visits to MEVIR’s headquarters and the supplies warehouse. As the foreman of foremen, he gathers a perspective on the collective obra of MEVIR rather than focusing on one single site. His ability to compare what is going on across different obras is useful to MEVIR. He also helps capataces to formulate backup plans, such as in case of long and heavy rains. One part of his job is to make surprise visits to obras. On a Monday afternoon in August, he shows up in Capilla del

⁴²⁴ Somewhat paradoxically, when I ask Castro what other institutions have improved lives in *Uruguay profundo*, he points to residence halls for students from small towns who come to study in the departmental capitals.

Sauce. As he walks around the obra with Federico Becerra, he explains that it is an important skill for a capataz to find the right balance between safety and getting things done. For example, he asks whether it is worth it to spend two days erecting scaffolding if roofing on a house will only take a half a day?

A supermajority of MEVIR employees, including Ramón, Martín, and Matías Castro, are skilled construction workers. According to ballpark figures from MEVIR human resources director Gabriel Moreno, there are over 400 construction workers, compared to around 110 office workers, and 60 field technicians.⁴²⁵ Each obra also has an administrator who works the first half of the day out of a container trailer next to the galpón. The *administrativo de obra* alleviates the administrative burden on the field architect and capataz and provides a direct contact on site for oficiales with logistical questions, reducing the need for them to call the MEVIR office in Montevideo. Each obra also has a *prevencionista*, a health and safety supervisor, who ensures compliance and occasionally gives workshops. There are around ten *prevencionistas* who work for MEVIR. They cover various obras within a region, showing up on site a couple times per week. Their boss, Nacho Patera, a MEVIR HR employee based in Montevideo, routinely goes on site, and is one of the few office workers who is intimately familiar with the obra.⁴²⁶

Working as a MEVIR construction worker means to exercise a trade within a trade. Almost all foremen and oficiales have the distinction of being formed from within the institution. Most of them started out as participants, and they were spotted by a capataz or architect who then

⁴²⁵ Gabriel Moreno points out that while office and obra employees are all employees of MEVIR, they belong to separate unions. Oficiales and capataces belong to SUNCA, the national construction union. Office employees belong to Group 20 of FFIPUNE, the union of workers in *personas públicas no estatales* (non-state public persons), the category of parastatal entity to which MEVIR belongs. Field technicians belong to Group 9 of FFIPUNE (interview, 9 June 2022).

⁴²⁶ One of Patera's HR colleagues laments that while they know almost all the oficiales by name, there are few they would recognize by face. Increasing the contact between office workers and the obra is a measure MEVIR would do well to consider, not least to remind office workers what MEVIR is about in the first place.

offered them a position as an official on account of their ability and work ethic.⁴²⁷ Capataces and oficiales are trained specifically in how to build MEVIR homes as opposed to other kinds of homes.⁴²⁸ This formation from within corroborates Federico Becerra's point about MEVIR architects that while capataces and oficiales are extremely valuable within MEVIR, their labor value is not easily transferrable elsewhere on the job market.

This is part of the reason why capataces and oficiales tend to spend their entire working life working for MEVIR without ever dipping their toes into any other construction company. Gabriel Moreno remarks that it is extremely rare for construction workers to quit. Only two did so during the entire year of 2021. Returning to the oft used football analogy, Moreno says that they *ponen la camiseta todos los días* (put on the jersey every day). In this case, they do so almost literally, as their work clothing, unlike office employees, bears the MEVIR logo.

Capataces and oficiales earn job stability unrivaled in the construction industry, a good work environment and a salary set equal to the salary one would command in the private sector, plus extra benefits. Moreno comments that this is in part to compensate for one very distinctive feature of their job: they must uproot after each obra and move to wherever MEVIR assigns

⁴²⁷ Ramón Castro tells me that a capataz notices quickly who is a good oficial, because "their eyes are alive". When scanning for participants that would make good oficiales, he looked for three things: work ethic, humility, and a calm demeanor ("*trabajador, humilde, y tranquilo*"). In addition to Ramón Castro, Magela Vicentino gives the example of Gustavo Palacios. Palacios was a teenager when his mother was a participant on the first plan in Mariscal in 1972, and he worked on the obra, as minors aged fourteen and older were allowed to help. He himself became a participant in a subsequent nucleus, where he was spotted and became an oficial before working his way up to capataz. Like Castro, he has a son who also became a capataz (interview, 22 June 2022). Ricardo Nopitsch adds the example of capataz José Coitiño who worked on his mother's house in Carlos Reyles (Durazno) (interview, 10 June 2022).

⁴²⁸ However, within MEVIR there are changes in typology that imply a learning curve. For example, when pioneering its new wood homes in northern Uruguay, MEVIR has sought to streamline construction knowledge by having certain foremen and oficiales focus on the wood homes. This was explained to me by Juan Duarte, the *puntero*, or lead oficial, on my visit to a wood obra in Las Flores, Rivera in January 2024. Duarte's parents were participants on a plan in Chapicuy in 1996. He soon thereafter joined MEVIR, and the first plan of ten homes in Las Flores in the late 1990s was one of his first plans. Duarte is enthusiastic about what a shift to wood means for MEVIR obras. The obra is cleaner and less cluttered, he says, there is less need for cargo, and carrying and lifting wood is easier on participants than are bricks.

them. MEVIR takes full responsibility for the cost and logistics of moving capataces and oficiales. One consequence of this is that a group of people from modest backgrounds end up quite well-traveled, at least domestically. One day in Capilla del Sauce, I visited the high school. Among my questions for students was to gauge informally their relationships with MEVIR. Unsurprisingly, most students raised their hands when I asked them whether they or a relative lived in a MEVIR home. What I did not expect was the presence of the children of oficiales. Oficiales make their mark on these small towns by moving to them for a year and a half. As Gabriel Moreno asserts, MEVIR “shakes” a locality when it arrives, not just on account of the construction site in view, but because of the construction workers who move in to other homes in the town. At the high school, a girl in her later teens introduced herself as the daughter of an oficial and she expressed how, unlike most of her classmates, she has friends all over the country. This is thanks to her having followed her father.⁴²⁹

Another particularity of the trade of MEVIR construction workers is that beyond simply providing manpower, they are also teachers, instructing a trade to participants. Moreno observes that in no other construction company do workers work alongside the people who will use the buildings.⁴³⁰ Unlike the architect and social worker who visit several times a month, the capataz, is on site every day working directly with participants, deciding who is best suited to what task and when. For both the oficiales and the participants, the capataz marks respect and authority. Ricardo Nopitsch has a profound sense of gratitude for the capataces with whom he has worked. He says that capataces need to have the idiosyncrasy of being a teacher and getting along with

⁴²⁹ Moreno does acknowledge that it can be difficult, however, for the wives of oficiales to find work unless they have an easily transferable profession, such as a grade school teacher.

⁴³⁰ Although skilled construction workers also work alongside members of housing cooperatives, the institutionalization of skilled construction workers within a quasi-construction company setup is a feature of MEVIR that distinguishes it from cooperatives.

people. They are “interpreters of participants”.⁴³¹ He adds that capataces are important because they train the future workers and because they control the obra. Both capataces and oficiales are not just skilled at building, but also at teaching how to build. Nopitsch makes the simple yet profound observation that labor disciplines people. Teresa Sangiovanni reflects that the obra leadership triad of architect, social worker, and capataz is a core part of MEVIR’s institutional idiosyncrasy. It leads to a respectful link with participants and creates a culture of always being available to find solutions. The formation of technicians from within, she adds, is a way of making sure construction workers are not on their own.⁴³² This transmission of knowledge gives people of modest backgrounds an additional skill in the labor market. A key component of this exchange is the building of mutual trust and confidence over time. As one illustration, gifts from participants to oficiales at inaugurations are heartfelt.

Nevertheless, MEVIR’s emphasis on promotion from within of construction workers who travel the country with the institution is under threat. MEVIR is opening what was long a closed labor market. It is hiring fewer oficiales from the roster of participants and is instead hiring more construction workers resident in the area of a given plan to work only on that plan. This is another example of cost saving measures enacted by the MEVIR board during the last several years. MEVIR saves money because it does not have to pay the moving fees and spend the time finding housing for these temporary oficiales, and because it can pay lower salaries for reasons of seniority. MEVIR’s other argument is that hiring locally foments work in the town.⁴³³

⁴³¹ Interview with Ricardo Nopitsch, 10 June 2022. Corroborating Ramón Castro’s comment that it is not his job to meddle in the obras of his fellow capataces, Nopitsch also observes that capataces do not organize much amongst themselves. After all, they each have their own site. “*El hombre de campo es callado por naturaleza*” (The [Uruguayan] countryside man is quiet by nature), he says, a trait that may stem from the loneliness and individualism of ranch labor. However, a meeting of capataces does take place at Uruguay’s biennial construction fair.

⁴³² Interview with Teresa Sangiovanni, 20 June 2022.

⁴³³ MEVIR HR employee Alfredo Guasque remarks to me one afternoon in his office (14 March 2024) that certain capataces have taken to bringing on the same temporary oficiales for different projects. These workers can be

In my conversations with veteran and retired MEVIR field technicians, this decision to hire construction workers “from without”, elicited more consternation than any other recent change in MEVIR. The skepticism surrounding these new hiring practices is both sentimental and practical. Architects and social workers maintain a strong degree of endearment towards capataces and their oficiales. A 2016 letter written by Ricardo Nopitsch to the capataces he worked with expresses this eloquently. In late October 2022, after the obra in Capilla del Sauce was finished, Federico Becerra invited me to his home in a sturdy rationalist apartment building dating from the late 1930s, located just a few blocks from Montevideo’s city hall. Before watching the Copa Libertadores Final in which three Uruguayans are playing, we chat about the role of construction workers in MEVIR. Becerra remarks that over the years, capataces and oficiales generate a very valuable technical knowledge. This, he claims, is “the great treasure of MEVIR; three hundred people who know what they are doing”. When I ask Becerra about the limits and possibilities of implementing a MEVIR-like program abroad, he responds that replicating this training would be the biggest challenge. He returns to the triad of money, materials, and manpower. Money, he argues, may not be easy to come by given circumstances, but at least procuring it is straight forward; you have it, or you do not. Materials you buy on the market with the money you have. But labor, however, is trickier. You do not form a capataz in five minutes. Becerra brings up the case of Miguel Ojeda, the oficial in Capilla del Sauce with whom I became best acquainted. Ojeda has spent his entire adult life learning by doing (33 years working for MEVIR), experience that helps him build a *terreno propio* home in 40 days. This

rehired by MEVIR for different obras but they need at least seven months off before starting again. Guasque, a Rivera native, cites one of these workers as the only female oficial he has come across in over a decade of working in MEVIR HR. Guasque also notes how some temporary construction workers lie about being from the area. MEVIR is less stringent, he says, about enforcing residency requirements for these oficiales than it is for participants.

knowledge transferred across generations, Becerra insists, saves money in the long run. MEVIR investing in oficiales yields greater returns than hiring on the open market. When it takes someone without Ojeda's knowledge 60 days to build the same house, the cost difference becomes enormous when rendered at scale.

Regardless of hiring from within or without, MEVIR recognizes that oficiales are of the place, either of the specific locality of the plan, or of Uruguay profundo as a shared set of localities. The oficial is a distinct breed, a product both of the culture of Uruguay profundo and of their formation in MEVIR as an institution. There is a striking parallel, and to some degree lineage, between their role as "*peones de obra*" on a construction site and the work of peones on nearby ranches. Indeed, many of these men, if they did not work for MEVIR, would be working in the campo. However, their quality of life, when summing pay, benefits, and security, far exceeds that of the average rural wage laborer. Since MEVIR construction workers exist in their own world outside of the capital, it is very unlikely that a construction worker from Montevideo would ever come across this organization as a labor opportunity. Gabriel Moreno corroborates that MEVIR is poorly known in the construction industry, although SUNCA has highlighted MEVIR as an example of construction work.⁴³⁴

Social Workers and Architects

The frequent use of the phrase *equipo técnico* (technical team) encapsulates the spirit of MEVIR's field social workers and architects. They are skilled technicians, and their labor is more valuable when working together. MEVIR social workers and architects bring the idea of

⁴³⁴ Moreno also adds that MEVIR has far fewer strike hours than most construction sites. When strikes affect MEVIR it is not due to anything specific to MEVIR. Instead, any stoppages are the result of wider construction industry issues.

MEVIR down to earth. Their work over the course of the obra revindicates the value of expertise. Unlike the endogenous capataces who live in the town of the obra, come from small towns and received their training from within the organization, MEVIR social workers and architects hold university degrees (something uncommon in Uruguay profundo) and mainly come from urban backgrounds. However, this does not excuse them from needing to be skilled at working in a rural setting with MEVIR's target population. Understanding participants and their needs is central to the job description. This is especially noteworthy for the architects; as the name of the profession suggests, social workers are (ideally) versed in the social. Ricardo Nopitsch seconds Federico Becerra's point about how being a MEVIR architect is highly specialized and not a very transferrable type of labor, "the best architect in the world might fail at MEVIR."⁴³⁵ Daniel García Trovero adds that MEVIR cannot simply hire any architect, as dialogue is crucial.⁴³⁶ This dialogue is not merely with typical figures in the construction industry, but it extends to the participants and to the rest of the technical team.⁴³⁷ MEVIR architects may be experts in the physical part of construction, but it is incumbent upon them to share their highly technical knowledge to participants in a digestible way.

In addition to serving as technicians, architects and social workers (and at the pre-obra stage, agronomists) are also teammates. As many jornadas as possible that involve the obra are coordinated so that both the architect and social worker are present, especially days when there is an assembly of participants. Social workers and architects generally have between six and eight jornadas per month. For architects, this is very much focused on the obra. For social workers,

⁴³⁵ Interview with Ricardo Nopitsch, 10 June 2022.

⁴³⁶ Interview with Daniel García Trovero, 15 February 2022.

⁴³⁷ While both architect and social worker interact with participants, and work together, there are clear boundaries set based on their respective expertise. For example, a social worker cannot order building materials (interview with Alejandro Sandobal, 1 June 2022). And architects do not involve themselves in one-on-one meetings with participants where sensitive information might arise.

these jornadas are divided between pre-construction (see Ch. 4), the obra, and post-construction (see Ch. 6). Field technicians are assigned to one or two obras at any given time (depending on size), but they may also fill in on other obras in cases where their colleagues are on leave. Mike Brennan, the agronomist, argues that the length of shared jornadas, more than tiring the technicians, generates strong links and teams.⁴³⁸

The composition of a technical team is decided in advance of the obra by the leadership in the social and construction divisions at the MEVIR office. Geography is an important concern, though not the only consideration.⁴³⁹ Ricardo Nopitsch recalls how when he was head of construction and Magela Vicentino and her colleague Ana Arzuaga were heads of social work, the three of them would decide on the team for each obra, although they were still open to input from others. They held three criteria: 1) is the technician geographically close to the obra? 2) do they have the character to fit the group of participants? and 3) do the architect and the social worker get along?

Working as a technician who transmits expertise and authority while also endearing themselves to participants requires a careful balance. In our evening around Magela Vicentino's *estufa de leña*, she generalizes that the relationship between participants and the technical team has become more horizontal over time.⁴⁴⁰ Silvia Cuello interjects that this has to do with other social changes beyond MEVIR. Vicentino gives two linguistic examples, the use of "*che*" and the informal second person pronouns "*tú*" and "*vos*" in lieu of the more formal "*Usted*", and one

⁴³⁸ As a case in point, when I interviewed Brennan at his house in Salto, Beatriz Sampayo happened to stop by and greet him on her way back from a *jornada* to her home in Paysandú.

⁴³⁹ It would be incredibly inefficient to send a Montevideo-based technician to do a plan in Artigas. However, Federico Becerra has done plans in Chapicuy (Paysandú), Villa Soriano (Soriano), La Charqueada (Treinta y Tres), and Curtina (Tacuarembó), all at least a three-and-a-half-hour drive from the capital. For La Charqueada, this sometimes meant spending the night in Treinta y Tres. Silvia Cuello, an especially willing traveler, says that she has advocated for MEVIR to select its best technical teams for the most challenging sites, though of course recognizing that proximity is a valid concern (field notes 10 May 2022).

⁴⁴⁰ Interview with Magela Vicentino, 22 June 2022.

cultural example, the imbibing of yerba mate.⁴⁴¹ Vicentino, now in her seventies, recalls that on the obra she never “*tuteaba*” or drank mate, even though she likes to tutear and drink mate outside of work. For her, the task is to be respectful without being distant.

Vicentino and Cuello concur that there is a fundamental change in the pueblos where MEVIR builds with the arrival of the technical team. In larger towns, there are a handful of white-collar professionals such as agronomists, notaries, agroveterinarians, and a couple doctors, given whatever the local economy can support. In many of the smaller and more isolated towns, Cuello stresses, many participants have never met a “professional”, and if they have, it is the rare visitor from a departmental capital or from Montevideo. Vicentino says that as a technician, “you can’t just be another friend. You have to position yourself. Being a friend later is the result of respect over eighteen months of working together. A good boss does not need to be *macanudo* (nice or cool). They need to be a good boss”. Parenting is similar, she notes. “I can be a friend to my kids, but first, I am their mother.” Vicentino summarizes the issue as follows, “let people know you have a role and then blur it as necessary.”

María Fajardo, of Palmitas, Soriano, and now the national Chamber of Deputies, is well-positioned to comment on the social worker-participant relationship. As a MEVIR participant, MEVIR social workers changed her life not just personally, but professionally. She has never worked for MEVIR, but her time as a participant on a plan for which Vicentino was the social worker, convinced her that she wanted to work in the social sphere. “I wanted to help people think about how to resolve their problems”, she says.⁴⁴² She also credits the influence of

⁴⁴¹ The informal vocative “*che*”, used to get one’s attention or as filler, is one of the most immediately recognizable features of Rioplatense Spanish. This is how the Argentine Ernesto “Che” Guevara earned his nickname among Cuban revolutionaries.

⁴⁴² Interview with María Fajardo, 27 July 2022. Fajardo’s point is crucial with respect to the question of participant agency. A Soriano-based employee of the BHU accompanies Fajardo and me in the interview at Fajardo’s office in the Legislative Palace annex. He makes the distinction that a MEVIR social worker’s job is less to give participants

Sangiovanni and Sampayo, who worked on two subsequent plans in Palmitas, for which Fajardo served on the local commission as treasurer, thanks to her background as an employee in a local credit union.⁴⁴³ Fajardo acknowledges that she has never received a university degree in social work but she has taken lots of courses (she repeats the word “ *cursos, cursos, cursos*” three times) and she evinces a desire to learn from people with degrees. Starting around 2007, she served for twelve years as the social director for the Intendencia of Soriano before entering Uruguay’s equivalent of the House of Representatives. One of the main reasons Fajardo was hired by the intendencia was on account of her visibility and know-how from having served on MEVIR commissions.

“Extreme poverty is mental” says Fajardo, making a gesture to her head.⁴⁴⁴ “This is why social workers are so important. Because of [MEVIR] social workers, there is a before and after [in the town].” She corroborates Cuello’s observation that many people in her group of participants had never earlier heard of the profession of social worker. Fajardo emphasizes both the physical and social elements of MEVIR’s construction process. “MEVIR is the house and *el relacionamiento* (how you relate to others). When you bring houses and life together, MEVIR is magic”, Fajardo exclaims. She gives the example of a participant in Palmitas who had grown accustomed to living with bugs and ferrets. The social worker taught her to wash floors, and she learned so well that she finished making her rent payments ahead of most of her group. When a social worker comes to a house, treatment of children improves, says Fajardo, remarking that a social worker encounters the “clinical history” of each family. She adds that forming networks is

a solution, more to give them the tools to recognize that they have a solution and to unlock that. This iterative and concept-based approach to problem solving rather than spoon-feeding answers characterizes MEVIR’s method.

⁴⁴³ Fajardo proudly shares that the second plan for Palmitas has the first MEVIR home designed specifically to accommodate a disabled person.

⁴⁴⁴ In my interview with Magela Vicentino (22 June 2022), Silvia Cuello gives another example of this “mental poverty” to which Fajardo refers. In many towns people see teenage pregnancies as an intractable reality rather than a problem to solve.

a significant part of a MEVIR social worker's job. This is true both for bringing together participants as a team of neighbors, but also for bringing together local institutions around a common cause.

This before and after in a town does not happen overnight. The obra is both a physical and a social process. Its progress can be measured in numbers of bricks laid, but also in the values and skills learned by the participants. MEVIR builds buildings in tandem with building better dwellers of these same buildings. The technical team does not just visit the obra to check-in, but to improve. Teresa Sangiovanni insists that construction is, for participants, a "process" of personal development rather than just the baseline of contributing sweat equity. Silvia Cuello likes to use the phrase "*proceso constructivo y social*" when describing the obra.⁴⁴⁵

This process is most visible during the assemblies between the technical team and participants.⁴⁴⁶ Assemblies occur at least once per month. They usually consist of two parts: sharing of general information about the progress of the obra (updates on things such as deadlines and mutual aid hours) and a more in-depth activity that brings the group together socially. The latter touches on specific themes related to the social aims of MEVIR and the responsibilities of living in a MEVIR home. The social worker runs the assembly, though the architect is generally present and often takes the lead on matters specific to construction and maintenance of the homes. The technicians come to the obra on other days without assemblies, and there are other chances for one-on-one meetings, but assemblies are when ideas are most explicitly shared with the group as a whole.

The number and timing of assemblies depends on the flow of the obra. Nonetheless, MEVIR social workers have a list of themes that they will touch on progressively over the course

⁴⁴⁵ Interview with Silvia Cuello, 25 October 2022.

⁴⁴⁶ *Oficiales* are occasionally asked to join depending on the subject matter.

of the obra. Sometimes an assembly will center on one theme. Other times, especially with time constraints, multiple themes are present. Silvia Cuello explains to me how the assembly topics are grouped under three stages. She has shared with me the list of topics meant to be discussed at assemblies. I have reproduced this list in paraphrased form below. Topics within assemblies for which I was present are indicated in bold.

Stage 1: Organizing the Group Before Construction

Initial meeting between participants and staff

Explanation and agreement on the method of working, roles, functions, and mutual aid

How mutual aid hours work and what they mean

Explanation of the architecture and the houses themselves

Workshops on safety, health, and gender violence

Stage 2: The Group Process and Capacity Building During Construction

Evaluation of the pre-construction stage

Review and signing of contract on rights and duties as a participant

Formation of the construction commission and group of delegates⁴⁴⁷

How to communicate with your peers

Three-month review of the proposition of mutual aid

How to search for solutions when specific issues arise

Six-month evaluation

Participants' children visit the obra and learn about MEVIR

High schoolers from around the country volunteer on the obra during school break⁴⁴⁸

Use and maintenance of the homes⁴⁴⁹

The formation of a neighborhood commission

Explanation of the drawing for deciding which family gets which home

The drawing

Explanation of the rental contract

Energy efficiency and tree planting workshop

Explanation of inauguration

Inauguration

Stage 3: Maintaining the Group Post-Construction

Analysis, reflection, and agreements on how to get along with your neighbors

Training the neighborhood commission

Explanation of procedures when dealing with MEVIR as your landlord

⁴⁴⁷ The construction commission is formed of participants who are liaisons to the skilled construction workers, and the group of delegates help keep track of mutual aid hours.

⁴⁴⁸ These volunteers are known as *Castores* (beavers). The Colegio Seminario, a Jesuit high school in Montevideo, is a major contributor of volunteers. The Castores accumulate a bank of hours, and the participants decide how to distribute these hours best amongst the participants who most need them.

⁴⁴⁹ Cuello adds that this meeting is important to MEVIR because the institution has a financial interest at stake.

*Obtaining services and the care and use of common spaces like the Salón Comunal
Abiding by rules of local government, MEVIR, and the Ministry of the Interior*

Purchasing and Supplies

MEVIR's longest serving employee, Alejandro Sandobal, calls the obra "MEVIR's primordial objective".⁴⁵⁰ He likens the division he leads, purchasing and supplies, to "the motor of the obra." Because of this, Sandobal claims, "we can't dawdle compared to other MEVIR divisions."

While there is a back and forth between MEVIR obras in the interior and the MEVIR office in central Montevideo, there is a third place and set of people that further connects office and obra. Purchasing and supplies has an office space at MEVIR HQ, but it also operates MEVIR's warehouse at the junction of Ruta 1 and Camino Tomkinson, some eleven kilometers from central Montevideo. The warehouse, or *depósito*, usually referred to as Tomkinson, opened in the late 2000s. Previously, MEVIR's storage was in a converted house on José Enrique Rodó street, situated between Pablo de María and Joaquín de Salterain streets in an area of Montevideo's Cordón neighborhood that is rapidly gentrifying. That space was not only significantly smaller, but also much less well positioned with respect to the highway network.

A trip to Tomkinson reveals the scale of an organization that builds homes in dozens of towns around the country at any given time. It is also a testament to the fact that MEVIR not only leaves a legacy with what it has built, but also continues to build day in and day out. I have not yet had a full tour of Tomkinson, but one morning on the way to Capilla del Sauce, I got a

⁴⁵⁰ These paragraphs draw from my interview with Alejandro Sandobal, 1 June 2022. MEVIR's purchasing and supplies division has ten employees, Sandobal and another colleague who specialize in supplies. Three other team members focus on billing, bidding in Montevideo, and bidding in localities specific to an obra, respectively. A fourth helps a bit with everything. Four additional purchasing and supplies employees are based at the Tomkinson warehouse.

taste. We made a three-minute stop as Becerra picked up some paint Sandobal had left for him with the security guard. The property, around the size of a *baby fútbol* pitch, is divided into what can get wet (outside) and what needs to stay dry (inside). There are security guards subcontracted by MEVIR on site 24/7 along with security cameras. During the day, four MEVIR employees run the site, with Sandobal making frequent visits. Indoors, one side is dominated by several rows of windows stacked side-by-side; the other side by wooden pallets. At the far end, I spot in storage the model mini-wood home that MEVIR takes to various expositions (see Chapter Five) for show and tell.

A closer inspection of Tomkinson would reveal a fascinating network of supply chains in a country that relies heavily on imports of manufactured goods. On my visit, I did make sure to snap an up-close photo of U.S. American made Dupont Weathermate Plus Housewrap tightly rolled into blue spirals. Writing on the label indicated that its destination was the plan in Cuaró. Beyond what gets used for building and for public showcases, Tomkinson also serves as a warehouse for repairs. Sandobal gives the example of what happens when hail breaks a roof for which the material does not exist anymore. MEVIR keeps a stock of roofs that have been dismantled but are in good shape. Besides, as Sandobal notes, you have to act quickly with this kind of thing. On the subject of repairs, Sandobal mentions an aluminum company that manufactures replacement parts specifically for MEVIR even though they are otherwise obsolete.

Sandobal points out twice in our interview that supplies are more complicated and take more thought than purchasing. The logistics of Tomkinson and the various obras illustrate this. Nevertheless, MEVIR's method of purchasing is an unsung feature of what makes it such a well-oiled machine. Sandobal highlights that because MEVIR uses public funds, transparency is the

first priority in buying. Even though MEVIR uses public funds, as a “non-state public person” it does not have to comply with TOCAF (Orderly Text of Accounting and Financial Administration), the agency that regulates state purchases. Complying with TOCAF would mean following a guide with pre-determined providers and prices. Instead, MEVIR has written its own purchasing manual. Not having to comply with TOCAF, Sandobal highlights, is a key part of what MEVIR makes an efficient user of resources.

“What we buy”, Sandobal says, “needs to be good, cheap, and of acceptable quality.” When a purchase is above 300,000 pesos (around \$8,000), MEVIR does organize purchase competitions. These are published online using a period of ten days for transparency. The first step is the specifications (*pliego*). After that, notaries confirm that all is in line, then MEVIR opens bidding to companies. MEVIR always looks at three companies when bidding for purchases. It is not obliged to buy from the cheapest bidder. Rather, it buys the best quality given the prices.⁴⁵¹ Sandobal adds that sometimes MEVIR even buys the same item from different providers, so long as all houses in a nucleus are made in the same manner. If prices quoted in different bids are within five per cent of each other, MEVIR can ask the provider to give another offer. Sandobal makes smaller purchases of his own volition, but for orders exceeding \$100,000, MEVIR authorities must approve them first. Examples Sandobal gives of such spendier purchases include roofs, bricks, beams for the new wood homes, and isopanel for the homes now being made from that material. MEVIR never buys for just one construction site. It buys to have things in stock for across the country. When Sandobal purchases, he needs to know in advance in what period of construction said material will be used. Every day, he receives requests from architects. If something is not in Tomkinson, Sandobal has to buy it.

⁴⁵¹ Sandobal’s educational background is helpful in this discernment. He was trained as an architectural assistant at the UTU.

Thanks in part to geographic concerns, not all materials come through Tomkinson. The longer the trip from Montevideo to an obra, the more it makes sense to pick up materials at different places along the way. MEVIR has no trucks of its own. It subcontracts to eight different companies for freight, and it always sends fully-laden trucks, which carry 24 tons. Sandobal gives some examples. If the architect at the obra in Minas de Corrales needs twelve tons worth of material from Tomkinson, then his team finds 12 tons of other material in other places to fill the truck. Isopanel, because it uses Styrofoam is extremely light. Building with isopanel does not pencil out outside of the south, because of prohibitive freight costs.

Cement also provides insight into the geographic considerations of MEVIR purchases. ANCAP and Cementos Artigas (not the only example of a private business naming itself after Uruguay's national hero) were MEVIR's two main historical providers. ANCAP has plants in Montevideo, Paysandú, and Minas, which meant MEVIR's cement distribution could be regionalized. In 2021, Cielo Azul, a Brazilian funded company opened a cement plant in Treinta y Tres. They made a great offer to MEVIR, where the freight is included in the price, and they deliver directly to the construction sites. The downside, according to Sandobal, is that many longstanding truck drivers with whom MEVIR had worked lost their jobs. But the financials made too much sense. Sandobal does note a consolation. Since MEVIR signed the Cielo Azul contract, when an architect sometimes needs just a bit of cement, it uses ANCAP, and the head of Cementos Artigas occasionally makes a counteroffer when the tonnage is right.

MEVIR is a nationwide network of moving parts. These parts are both the supplies and the people who deliver and use them. The example of one cement truck driver illustrates this. Federico Becerra tells the story of José Luis “el Puma” Rodríguez.⁴⁵² Rodríguez, who lives in his

⁴⁵² Field notes, 14 October 2022. Rodríguez is nicknamed such, because he shares his given names and his paternal surname with a Venezuelan singer who is an icon throughout the Spanish speaking world. It is an inevitability that

hometown of Bolívar (pop. 139) along Ruta 7 in the northeastern corner of Canelones just across the Santa Lucía River from Fray Marcos, is a lifelong *fletero* of MEVIR. He specializes in transporting cement. Becerra explains to me how you cannot store Portland cement for more than a couple months, because it hardens. This makes the logistics of it crucial, unlike other materials that you can have around indefinitely, space concerns aside. Changes in technology now mean that Rodríguez can wake up at 7 AM rather than 3 AM as he no longer has to stop at the ANCAP plant and the MEVIR office. El Puma knows the whole country. Becerra reminisces how Rodríguez helped him a lot on an obra in La Charqueada (Treinta y Tres). For example, the site was very flat, in a region where rice cultivation predominates, and thus el Puma told him to build a canal in the middle of the obra for drainage. Rodríguez also does all the moving of MEVIR construction workers and their families when they complete one obra and start another. He was present when a capataz's wife give birth on a truck in Rivera. Becerra mentions another anecdote about the value of MEVIR *fleteros*. A MEVIR truck once saved a man's life. Deep in rural Salto, a man was having a heart attack, but the ambulance that came from Salto could not cross a creek. On the other side was a MEVIR truck. The doctor managed to put all the medical equipment in the truck and treat the man in time.

Besides men with nicknames taken from animals, such as “El Pollo” Curbelo and “El Puma” Rodríguez, Sandobal reminisces with delight about other characters who have formed part of this network linking obras. Very few businesses in Uruguay, he notes, buy on the scale of MEVIR. Therefore, MEVIR is an “appetizing” client. For some companies, MEVIR is their main client. He gives the example of a smaller company working in plastics. For others that are larger, MEVIR is a smaller portion of their business. In an earlier time, Sandobal recalls, some

many people named José Luis Rodríguez will be nicknamed “el Puma”. This is the case for a current Uruguay national soccer team player.

companies worked exclusively for MEVIR, such as family-run and one-man artisan outfits. He gives the examples of an illiterate Italian named Rosario Infante who ran a blacksmith shop, and a *canario* with the surname Larrosa who made kitchen counters of “*mármol grandote*” (giant marble) by hand and not off of a production line. Sandobal mentions this to illustrate how less and less of the materials going into MEVIR homes are artisanally made.

VISITS TO THE OBRA IN CAPILLA DEL SAUCE

My choice of Capilla del Sauce as my main field site to follow the progress of an obra was not accidental. Logistical concerns were important. Both Silvia Cuello and Federico Becerra live within two kilometers of the apartment I rent in Montevideo, and thus getting to and from the obra would be simplified. The timing of the obra also played in my favor. I would begin my visits about halfway through the obra in early April and would be able to follow the progress through to the drawing and inauguration stages scheduled for the latter third of the year. The parameters of the obra were another plus: 34 families in a nucleus and another ten families building either *planta urbana* or *area rural* homes. A round trip of five and a half hours, accompanying Cuello and Becerra, two of MEVIR’s most experienced field technicians, would also give ample time for learning more about the history of previous obras. In our first meeting in the MEVIR offices, Becerra said that “Capilla”, as it is commonly known, would be a good place visit. It has three previous MEVIR plans and it lies close to an important *estancia* (Santa Clara), one with ties to the Gallinal family.

From April to December 2022, I made twelve visits to Capilla del Sauce, most with both Becerra and Cuello, though on a couple occasions one of them would be absent due to illness or vacation. The remainder of this chapter is drawn from my field notes and photographs

of these visits. In order to maximize the value of my visits in understanding MEVIR obras as a social process, I chose to prioritize traveling on days with assemblies. As I arrived in the chronological middle of the obra, my knowledge of the earlier assemblies is drawn from hearsay.



Figure 17: Google Maps aerial photo of Capilla del Sauce. The fourth MEVIR nucleus, completed in 2022, is to the northeast. The three previous nuclei lie west of Ruta 6, the main north-south road.

I hasten to point out further limitations of my ethnography. My account of the obra is inherently incomplete, and not just because I was on site for only twelve days. My narrative of this plan in Capilla, despite showcasing much of what MEVIR accomplishes up and down the country, is representative of a single obra with just one technical team in one place at a particular point in time. My lack of prior experience on construction sites (let alone ones where Spanish is the spoken language) and of training in architecture mean that my reading of MEVIR as a social

phenomenon is inevitably stronger than my reading of MEVIR as a physical one. As the year progressed, however, and the more comfortable I became with understanding the process of the obra, the richer my field notes became. As the nature of my research became increasingly institution-centric over the course of the year, and because I chose to travel with technicians from Montevideo rather than live in Capilla del Sauce, my reading of the obra foregrounds the technicians (and their voices) more than participants.⁴⁵³ Part of what made these trips meaningful was the excitement of doing my fieldwork with people doing their own “*trabajo de campo*” and sharing a love for “the field” broadly defined with Becerra and Cuello.

Capilla del Sauce (pop. 835) takes its name from a chapel built by an estanciero near the Yí River at the end of the nineteenth century. Surrounded by extensive sheep and cattle ranches, it sits at 182 kilometers north and slightly east from Montevideo along Ruta 6. Although it is in Florida Department, it lies over 100 kilometers from Florida the capital (pop. 33,640). It is thus much more connected to Sarandí del Yí (pop. 7,176), a town situated eighteen kilometers further north along Ruta 6 just across the border in Durazno Department.

Rather than taking Ruta 6 in its entirety from Montevideo, on most mornings Becerra, Cuello, and I would, given construction work and the poor condition of some stretches of road, take the divided highway of Ruta 5 as far as the town of Canelones, turning off on Rutas 11 and 64 to Paso de la Cadena, where we would stop for gas. The next stop, around a half an hour later, would be to grab a takeaway lunch at the Falero bakery in San Ramón, at which point we joined up with Ruta 6. The timing of our trips depended on the needs of the obra on that day and whether there was any rush to return to Montevideo by a certain time in the evening. We would generally arrive at the obra between 9:30 and 10 and depart between 4:30 and 5.

⁴⁵³ Any follow-up research in Capilla del Sauce will focus more on capturing the stories and backgrounds of the participants and incorporating them into this narrative.

7 April 2022

When we arrive in the morning, Becerra gives me a tour around the obra and introduces me to the capataz, Claudio Adán, who hails from San José Department. Around the halfway point in the obra, some houses are closer to completion than others. The most advanced have roofing, while others do not even have the exterior column of brick. Outside one house sits a large crate of polished floor slabs made by ThinCompact, an Argentine company which has its plant on the outskirts of Paraná, the capital of Entre Ríos Province. After we lunch on a *torta de fiambre* (a savory cake of ham and cheese), we bought at Falero, Cuello shares with me her written plan for the afternoon's assembly.⁴⁵⁴

On tap today are two items: first a recap of the previous assembly on reviewing the rules of mutual aid hours, and second, a set of group activities evaluating how participants feel at the halfway point of the obra.

The choice of location for assemblies varies with each obra. Especially, in the smallest towns (such as an assembly I attended in Las Flores, Rivera), an existing MEVIR salón comunal is used. The size of the group also matters. For the fourth plan in Capilla del Sauce, the Club Social Capilla del Sauce, on a corner of the main square, served as the venue except on rare occasions when the presence of the oficiales was requested, in which case the venue was the galpón de obra. Located only a few blocks from the obra, the club provided both a large enough space, and easy access. Cuello later explains to me that Isabel, a participant, is the head of the commission that runs the Club Social and she was able to procure the facility for MEVIR assemblies. At the beginning of the process, they met in the salón comunal of a previous Capilla

⁴⁵⁴ For as much as Uruguay is associated abroad with beef production, manifold ways of uniting ham, cheese, and dough are by far a more staple fixture in the standard Uruguayan diet. At Montevideo supermarkets, especially on weekdays (*asados* are far more common on weekends), lines at the deli counter are much longer than at the butcher counter. Cost concerns factor into such decisions.

plan, which proved to be small, not least during the pandemic, when the group had to meet in three waves of smaller groups to maintain physical distancing.⁴⁵⁵



Figure 18: The architect Federico Becerra (white hard hat) and the skilled construction worker Miguel Ojeda (yellow hard hat) work with a participant on his planta urbana home in Capilla del Sauce (photo by author, 7 April 2022).

⁴⁵⁵ Field notes, 3 October 2022.

At today's assembly, most participants arrive by motorcycle after having eaten lunch at their homes, and before returning to work on the obra. Early in the meeting, at which point there is open discussion, there is a disagreement between participants about the details of a benefit event they are organizing to help pay for food and drink at the inauguration. Cuello later explains to me that it is unusual for a group to plan this far ahead, but she is pleased, because it shows how excited they are about their moving into their new homes.

After the group activities, which center on participants making drawings that help them make sense of different aspects of the obra, it is time for the obra liaison and the delegate of hours to make their monthly reports. Isabel, a policewoman, reads off what was built in March and compares it to what was scheduled to be built. Veronica, the delegate, reads down the list of families and shares the hours they have contributed. One of the younger participants, and one of the few, like Isabel, to complete a high school education, clarifies to the group about how she will make up hours over the next month since she has been traveling often to Salto where she is studying agroveterinary medicine.

Throughout the assembly, Cuello moderates, making sure to ask if the group has objections or questions. "The best way to work together", she assures, "is to talk". As a way of keeping the group engaged, she often asks for a show of hands. The clothing she and Becerra wear typify Uruguay's subdued sartorial standards, but also help minimize social differences between technicians and participants. Becerra is wearing gray jeans and a plaid shirt, while Cuello wears jeans and a red fleece vest over a button-up.

Becerra concludes the assembly with a pep talk reminding participants that we are at the halfway point. "You've done a good job. I want to come back to Capilla in eight to ten years with good memories of you and with my chest puffed." As we are approaching Easter, Becerra also

reminds participants that construction will take a week's break during Holy Week, referred to in secular Uruguay as Tourism Week, or simply "*turismo*". As the needs of the obra shift, with houses growing closer to completion, Becerra shares how participants' involvement will change accordingly. One example is that some of the later tasks, such as painting, tend to be more solitary than building walls, which forms much of the labor done in the first half of the obra.

Before we leave town, we buy some fruit to-go at a *verdulería*. This is not, however, an ordinary produce stand. Rather, it is one of many examples up and down Uruguay of a MEVIR home that doubles as a business. Ana, the participant, has just moved into what was one of the first planta urbana homes in this fourth plan in Capilla. Becerra explains to me how Ana wanted her house to be as close as possible to the main road so that she could watch people go by and say hello. This surprised Becerra, who is used to siting *terreno propio* homes to maximize privacy, but he happily obliged her request.

3 May 2022

Silvia Cuello grew up the eldest of four children in Melo. On this ride up to Capilla, she tells me more about her background. Around 1990, she moved to Montevideo in her late teens to study and has lived there ever since. When Uruguayans enter university, they choose one faculty tied to a specific subject or profession. This limits their options, compared with U.S. American students who can change their "major" multiple times without bureaucratic hassle, or having to play too much catch up. Cuello was a victim of this system where disenchanted or struggling students often land back at square one, though for her, it turned out for the better. During her first year, she studied economics, and though she enjoyed it intellectually, she did not excel. She looked in the University of the Republic's catalog about what other paths she might take, and when she saw social work, she immediately said, "that's me", despite only ever having had

tangential exposure to social workers. Shortly after earning her degree, she began working for MEVIR.

Multiple trips to Capilla involved running errands in Sarandí del Yi. Some of these were related to the obra, but others involved killing multiple birds with one stone on other MEVIR needs while in the area. This anecdote perhaps belongs in the next chapter, as it illustrates how MEVIR the institution shows a commitment to its participants that does not end with the handing over of housekeys. However, as it also illustrates how a day in the field unfolds, I have included it here. Today I witnessed the first chapter in a bureaucratic saga involving Julio, a participant in a previous MEVIR plan in Capilla del Sauce. As Julio has no proximate kin, Cuello, in her capacity as MEVIR social worker, has taken on responsibility for putting an end to his predicament. He is too young to collect a normal age-based retirement, but his frailness and awkward gait make it impossible for him to work as a rural laborer or in other odd jobs. On account of his financial hardship, the UTE has cut off the power in his MEVIR home. In order to have the income to pay his bills, Julio needs a doctor's clearance to prove to Uruguay's entity in charge of social security, the BPS, that he cannot work and is eligible to collect disability unemployment. While Becerra is ironing out administrative tasks in the obra office, I accompany Cuello as she picks up Julio at his home. He greets us enthusiastically, proud to introduce us to a sheep grazing in his back yard. He explains that this one belongs to his neighbor and that he and his neighbor take turns putting their respective sheep in each other's yards to make the most of grazing potential. He then hops in the car, and Cuello drives to the DNIC (National Office of Civil Identification) office in Sarandí, one of a handful of state institutions that does not have a physical presence in Capilla.

Back at the galpón de obra, Becerra, Adán, and the *administrativa de obra*, Victoria, are reviewing an inventory of building items. Becerra explains how it is important to align materials with the season. The administrativos de obra work in the mornings to keep the same hours as the office in Montevideo. Therefore, Becerra makes sure to take care of all his administrative work while Victoria is on site and he then turns his focus in the afternoon to physical construction tasks. For example, together they go through monthly BROU accounts together, in order to ensure that expenses line up with receipts, and to make sure that transactions have been registered.

Making rent payments on the homes where oficiales live while they are working on an obra was a responsibility that fell on the architect until later in 2022 (see later in this chapter). It was not always like this, however. In 2013, SUNCA made a *convenio* with the MEVIR administration of the time requiring MEVIR to provide housing for oficiales. Rent was previously built into the salary of oficiales. The impetus for this change was well-guided. Oficiales often tried to make a profit by renting homes that were cheap and in poor condition. As such, there was a great irony that MEVIR was contributing to the very insalubrity it aims to eradicate. In the obra office, Becerra emphasizes to me that he is legally responsible for 25 houses in Uruguay (approximately half in Capilla and half in Ombues de Lavalle). MEVIR's architects, he explains, are trying to move this job to the accounting division, but the hold-up is that the people who do this need to travel, and none of the accountants do. At one point, Becerra reaches BROU's maximum transfer amount for the day and he will have to resume the transactions tomorrow.

I have the chance to chat for a bit with Federica, the *prevencionista*, who visits twice a week from her home in the other Sarandí, Sarandí Grande (pop. 6,130) along Ruta 5 in the

western half of Florida Department. She explains to me that accidents on site are rare, but minor ones do happen. The fact that MEVIR builds homes of only one story helps. Extra protection for both oficiales and participants is needed whenever there are particles flying, which happens on several occasions. In 2014, MEVIR started requiring gloves, though many workers have struggled to adopt the custom. She also notes that there is a special type of glove for dealing with chemicals.

Another encounter occurred that illustrates how, as was the case with Julio, obras present collide with obras past. A woman and her child come to the obra looking for Becerra. She explains that she has one of the existing MEVIR homes in Capilla and is interested in having repairs done. Becerra asks for her hornero number and takes down her information. For MEVIR families, the hornero number of one's home serves as an all-encompassing form of identification.

9 May 2022

The following week, I return to Capilla, this time with Becerra only. Neither my notes nor my photos from the day have much to add about the obra, but our conversations on the road sheds light on broader issues of Uruguayan land use. Driving through rural Canelones, he points out various ways in which this road scene differs from a rural road in the north. There are multiple power lines of different voltage, the road's pavement is in better condition, and when people are waiting for a bus (buses are usually encountered in greater number than in the north), they do not have a suitcase with them. As we enter the sprawl of Montevideo in the evening, Becerra argues how Uruguay, a country whose viability was predicated on freely roaming livestock, continues to think of land use as extensive, be it rural or suburban.⁴⁵⁶ He makes the bold claim that the unplanned eastward expansion of metropolitan Montevideo into bedroom

⁴⁵⁶ MEVIR, however, is building homes on progressively smaller footprints.

communities along the Canelones coastline was one of the most significant urban transformations in Latin America during the 1990s, at least on a per capita basis. The irony of this is that while more and more Uruguayan land is being lived on by humans, the national population has been stagnant.

7 June 2022

Early in the car ride, the topic of conversation turns to the size of MEVIR obras, and the idea that larger obras sustain smaller ones, at least in financial terms. In the 1990s, for example, MEVIR would build three or four plans of between 80 and 100 homes at a time.⁴⁵⁷ Since then, MEVIR has developed fewer and fewer “giant” plans. One reason for this, say Cuello and Becerra, are that larger projects bring more social problems with them.⁴⁵⁸ Becerra and Cuello give the example of a plan in San Antonio, Canelones of a hundred homes. The plan was divided into two separate obras that were done simultaneously. This reminiscing about past obras elicits memories of retired colleagues, including the agronomist Álvaro Rossi. Becerra recalls fondly that Rossi would explain to him how you could tell the prosperity of a town based on the architecture of its branch of the BROU. For example, says Becerra, Young in Río Negro Department, with some of the most productive ranching, has a lavish branch. José Enrique Rodó in Soriano Department at the epicenter of the grain boom has recently built a state-of-the-art branch. Tala’s BROU is a good-looking building, but it is “lost in time”.⁴⁵⁹

Borrowing a hard hat and an appropriately-sized pair of yellow workers boots, I take to working on the obra once we arrive in Capilla. Adán, the capataz, introduces me to Gómez, a tall

⁴⁵⁷ Becerra adds that MEVIR asked “the best architects” to do these biggest plans, though what he means by “best” is a subjective matter worth further scrutiny.

⁴⁵⁸ This contradicts to some extent Ramón Castro’s comment that he preferred larger obras because there was more room for participants to improve.

⁴⁵⁹ Rossi’s theory on the architectural quality and upkeep of BROU bank branches would make for an interesting geographical exercise.

and strong official, who instructs me on my tasks. I spend the next couple hours cleaning off metal beams, and mixing sand, dry cement, and water to make the *material* that will go between the bricks. At one point, Gómez, who remarks that they are not allowed to play music on the obra, starts singing.⁴⁶⁰

As the lunch hour arrives, participants and oficiales return to the galpón de obra and bring back the tools they have checked out, placing them neatly onto numbered racks on the wall. Each tool has a number, both to prevent loss and to emphasize personal responsibility. After the tools are hung up, participants and oficiales congregate outside the galpón and wait for the capataz to say two simple words, “*hasta luego*” (until later), before they retreat for lunch.

Today’s assembly is about the use and maintenance of MEVIR homes, a topic that combines the social with the architectural as much as any other. As such, Cuello and Becerra are equally vocal. They have projected a MEVIR PowerPoint on the back wall of the Club Social. Before beginning, Becerra, in a stocking cap to keep warm in what is a large unheated room, remembers to announce that at the next meeting the manufacturer of the wood stoves will come and explain how to use them. Cuello starts by stressing that maintenance depends on each of those present in the room. She poses the guiding questions of the day, “*why* and *how* do we take care of our homes?” Participants give concise and well-thought answers, such as “discipline” and “order”. Cuello mentions different items in the home, noting which ones have a warranty. Becerra gives what is not to be his last lecture on the overarching importance of humidity. He notes how one of the walls will always have less sun.

With respect to use and maintenance, the obra serves as a model and trial for participants. Becerra says that “on the obra, we try to set an example for you by keeping the galpón highly

⁴⁶⁰ Becerra later clarifies to me that on terreno propio homes, music is allowed. On nuclei, it is up to the capataz, as MEVIR has no pre-set rule.

organized, secure, and efficient.” Cuello draws on stories from previous plans to help warn what *not* to do. Laughing, she recalls someone who had moved into their MEVIR home and, treating it in the same manner as the dirt-floor dwelling from which they had recently moved, they made a stew, and threw all the residue on the floor for composting.

Becerra introduces the topic of doors. He explains the importance of not forcing them closed. The general lesson is one of “don’t be impatient and make things worse.” Cuello keeps the crowd engaged by framing information in terms of questions. She asks of the group, “besides natural forces, what of our own actions have effects in the house?” Answers from participants include “steam from cooking” and “water from bathing.” Isabel, the policewoman, asks about painting, and the subject of window care also comes up.

In the absence of a whiteboard or chalkboard, Cuello has turned a round table on its side, and placed it atop another table. She has taped several pieces of paper on which she has printed questions for the participants today. The collective answers from the group she writes below in marker for all to see.

WHY DO WE CARE FOR AND MAINTAIN OUR HOME ADEQUATELY? WHAT MEANING DOES IT HAVE?

- Duration*
- Conserving it in a good state*
- Living in a clean, tidy manner*
- Valuing the effort that we put in to make the home*
- To have a good coexistence*
- Harmony, hygiene*

HUMIDITY IN THE HOME, FOR WHAT REASONS DOES IT APPEAR?

- Pipes*
- Fissures*
- Lack of ventilation*

WHAT IS REQUIRED OF **THE FAMILY** TO TAKE CARE OF AND MAINTAIN A HOME?

- Collaboration*
- Cleaning, time, order*

At the end, Becerra and Cuello acknowledge how dense the talk was, but assure participants that MEVIR's "Guide to Use and Maintenance" will be available to them.

The rest of the assembly covers general information. Cuello announces that the first week of July, the Castores will visit, working six hours a day on the obra and also volunteering at Capilla del Sauce's grade school. Becerra tells the story of Cielo Azul cement that I recounted earlier in this chapter. Much of the ensuing conversation centers on an unlikely matter, the value of reading, an activity Cuello is doing her best to inculcate into participants' habits. In this, she is helped by a library that she has set up in the break room adjacent to the galpón de obra, with the help of Broli, a socially-oriented bookstore in Montevideo. Cuello mentions how much she appreciates the experience of her parents having read to her regularly when she was a child. A participant responds that this is great in theory, but that it is harder today when parents are less present. "We are so tired from work and having to take care of our kids", she says, implying that there is not enough time or energy left to create a reading habit. Invoking MEVIR's value of self-improvement, Cuello responds in truth and jest that "we are machines of making excuses."

As with the previous assembly, Isabel reads her building report, and Veroncia updates the group on mutual aid hours. Cuello concludes by giving a mini pep talk and telling the participants that they are lucky to have Adán as their capataz, since he "truly thinks about the obra day-to-day and week-to-week."

19 July 2022

As we turn off of Ruta 5, Becerra and Cuello discuss how the jornada will go. There is a lot on the agenda for today. We stop for gas in Paso de la Cadena, where there is frost on the ground. Becerra steps outside for fresh air, but quickly hops back in the car as his ears start to freeze.

Back on the road again, Cuello tells of Julio's latest travails in his quest for disability payments. Cuello asked a friend who works at the BPS to see if Julio could get treated in Durazno or somewhere closer to Capilla del Sauce so that he did not have to travel to Montevideo. He could, was the answer, but the wait would be a matter of months as opposed to mere days in the capital. So, Cuello advised Julio to take a bus the three hours from Capilla to Montevideo. When he arrived in the capital, he was informed that the doctor was sick, but that he should proceed to the clinic anyways to get a paper signed so that the cost of his bus ticket would be covered. The next week, in Cuello's telling, at least BPS had the grace to tell him two days ahead of time that the doctor would not be there. The appointment is arranged for next week.⁴⁶¹

After tending to administrative matters with América, the new *administrativa de obra*, Becerra takes a walk around the obra with Adán, mostly to see how things have progressed. Becerra has been away on vacation for two weeks to coincide with his daughters' winter recess from school. As he remarks to me, we are entering the homestretch ("*la recta final*"), which presents its own challenges. Various observations arise during our walkabout. Adán explains that the Castores painted many of the walls with an initial coating. This was something the high schoolers could do in groups and with little technical instruction. He also explains that the Castores had laid down a concrete walkway so that they could access the two houses in which they stayed. These, although not technically finished, were already equipped with temporary electricity and water. I notice two giant green tarps sitting on the road in front of some of the houses. Adán explains that these are thrown on top of yet-to-be-roofed houses to protect them from the rain. The architect and capataz then chat for a while about the matter of absenteeism

⁴⁶¹ A broader point of this story, besides Cuello's commitment to a participant's well-being, is the epidemic of absenteeism in Uruguayan public institutions (something I observed firsthand in 2014 while volunteering at high schools), especially in the sparsely populated interior.

amongst the oficiales. Of the nineteen construction workers on the obra, no more than four have issues, but these need addressing. For one oficial, his absences are understandable given family circumstances, but for another, there is no readily apparent reason.⁴⁶² Becerra says to Adán that it is better to motivate them on a one-on-one basis than in a group, keeping any discussions private. At one point, the two discuss the lack of fine-grained sand in the Uruguayan construction industry, a problem not just for MEVIR, but even for building towers in Punta del Este. The problem is that shaking sand properly takes time. Even so, the finer the sand, the less porous the building.

We hop over to the planta urbana homes that fill in some of the emptier patches of land in the pre-MEVIR urban fabric of Capilla, closer to the plaza where the Club Social is located. Miguel Ojeda, the oficial who Becerra would consistently cite to me as case in point for why MEVIR needs to continue promoting from within, is building his own house. His wife, a native of Capilla, is, technically speaking, the participant. Her brother is an oficial on the obra, and Ojeda's college-aged son Leandro is also helping. Ojeda is originally from Egaña, along Ruta 2 in Soriano Department. He learned construction techniques as a child helping his dad who worked with building projects on estancias. He recalls travelling over thirty kilometers by bicycle to worksites. Becerra shows me how "lean" Ojeda's worksite is. "This is experience", Becerra says, "look at the bricks in the door, and the concrete platform. You'll rarely see lines this straight. Notice also how the worksite is spotless." Indeed, the difference is noticeable when we visit the next planta urbana house. Becerra advocates that experienced oficiales like Ojeda should be teamed up more often with young oficiales, who are just starting out.

⁴⁶² Becerra later stresses to me that this knowledge of employees' circumstances is crucial to how MEVIR obras work.

Before lunch, we visit a couple more of the *planta urbana* homes. These are on the edge of town, facing nothing but open countryside on the opposite side of Ruta 6. Becerra says that the plot of land for any one of these homes would cost around \$8,000 but also warns that value is not the same as price. In another country (or even in Uruguay, near the more exclusive *balnearios*) this scenery and peace could cost twenty times more.

The assembly today is in the *galpón*, because the first part includes an announcement that also pertains to the *oficiales*. It would be inconvenient for them to go to the club and come back to the obra. Becerra cuts to the chase by announcing that MEVIR has asked the Capilla technical team to move up the inauguration date from sometime in November or December to sometime in October, though no specific date has been set yet.⁴⁶³ He reflects on the context of this obra that it was started during the pandemic, and he references changes in the scene of the obra over time, alluding to bulldozers digging giant holes in front of houses over the last few months in order to build sanitation. He concludes his speech by asking for a “*grito de gol*” (cheering a goal), to which the assembled crowd applauds. Adán, a man of few words, uses this moment to kindly remind the participants that it is now more important than ever to put in their 24 hours weekly. Cuello asks the *oficiales* if they wish to add anything. They stay quiet, but eventually she elicits some brief remarks from Ojeda and an *oficial* with the surname of Márquez.

Becerra makes it clear that moving up the inauguration date is a matter of chance. He expresses that he does not want to instill false expectations in people from other parts of the country that their obra will only last twelve months when they were originally told that it would

⁴⁶³ Becerra shared with the participants and *oficiales* that the inauguration date would be moved forward but did not share with them publicly why that was the case and how that decision was made. This is an interesting example of information asymmetry in MEVIR. It is the job of the technical team to filter what information from MEVIR HQ is necessary to share with participants and what information is not necessary, or even inadvisable, to share. Becerra told me on the car ride back that the reason the inauguration was moved forward was because on a recent trip to the obra in Capilla (that also included trips to rural schools to distribute books), MEVIR’s construction head Ariel Amen and a board member were pleased with how ahead of schedule the obra was.

take fifteen. “There are specific factors here in Capilla”, he says, “including the *saneamiento* [sanitation] that have aligned for us to work more quickly.”

Cuello gleefully chimes in, “As I am an optimist, I love challenges, and when people work together they can achieve extraordinary things.” She contrasts the news of the ahead-of-schedule obra with a common self-critique of Uruguayan culture, that Uruguayans are not used to giving their best and that the minimum effort is usually acceptable. Her comments reinforce the idea of MEVIR serving as an institution that inculcates humanist values and patriotic sentiment. “It is important for us in Uruguay to have challenges. In any work, the human is the most important. You create a climate of respect and hard work and don’t just watch the clock tick. The work [on the obra] is not done without you.” She also highlights that this group of participants has been doing good work, because there is a lower ratio than is usual of hours done by *colaboradores*.

Isabel, the de facto leader of the participants, talks about how much they have learned from the oficiales. Cuello announces that the new inauguration date means that the drawing will now be in September. Isabel jokes about gifting a lamb (presumably prepared and cooked) to the oficiales. Becerra reiterates that this is great news, but that this is no time to let up (“*no aflojemos*”). “Silvia [Cuello] and I will leave [after the obra], but we want to leave you with something”. He ends with another soccer analogy, “We have to keep playing the game with the same concentration.” Adán, in a sign of the surety of his leadership, says he has nothing to add when prompted by Becerra. The oficiales are dismissed, and we continue with regular assembly programming.

Much of the rest of the assembly deals with previewing the remaining topics to be covered before the inauguration. As the inauguration has been moved up, there will now be two

assemblies per month. The next one, on 2 August, will be about energy efficiency. The matter of drawing lots will also need preparation. At another assembly, an agronomist colleague who was present during some of the selection phase will come to talk about how participants will incorporate trees into the neighborhood.

Cuello tells the group that they will still need to talk about “*convivencia vecinal*” (getting along with your neighbor). She reminds them how at the beginning of the obra, she asked “who are your friends?”, and many said they only knew each other in passing, despite hailing from the same small town. Later, Cuello says, we will need to define the two or three people who will be the “*referentes del barrio*”, the people who represent the new neighborhood in its contact with MEVIR. This, she highlights, is something you will decide on, making clear to the participants that this is an example of their agency in the process.

Cuello brings up two more examples of participant agency. She explains that a few participants will speak to the public at the inauguration on behalf of the group. She also announces that the new neighborhood will have a name, one that participants will be able to choose, with the limitation it must be named for a deceased person. She asks the participants to think, in the meantime, about which meaningful deceased person they might propose at the next assembly. A participant asks if any proposed person must be linked with MEVIR. Cuello responds that the rationale is to find names of people who are linked to the locality.⁴⁶⁴

In addition to gaining the keys for their home at the inauguration, each family, Becerra says, will also receive an energy efficiency kit from UTE. He lists the five items in the kit: a timer for lowering consumption, LED lamps, an extractor, a heater for the stove, and a brush to clean the chimney duct. He tells them not to worry as they will receive a link to a YouTube video

⁴⁶⁴ There have, however, been examples of participants naming a nucleus after a deceased MEVIR technician who worked in the same locality on a previous plan.

demonstrating how to use these things. Adán advises the participants not to close the blinds on the obra until the inauguration, as falling rocks could cause costly damage.

Cuello steps aside from procedural matters for a second to ask for a public applause for Diner, a participant who just gave birth to her second child in late June. Cuello also ties this occasion to the question of participant agency. She asks the group what they would like to do with the hours accumulated by the Castores. She acknowledges that there are few things that participants have the power to decide, so she wants to give them this chance. At least one member of each of thirty out of the thirty-four families is present. The group decides in a unanimous fashion to donate the Castores hours to Diner, in order to make up for her time away from the obra. Diner thanks the group and there is a round of applause. Cuello happily announces that Diner will resume working on the obra next month, and that with the participation hours donated, she will then be up to date.

Becerra responds to a participant's question about paint, explaining that MEVIR buys paint in large quantities, and therefore does not have many colors. All houses will be painted in white as a primer coat, but participants can choose the subsequent color.⁴⁶⁵

Cuello returns to her beloved matter of reading and gets a participant to talk about the books in the obra library and at the rural schools. After thanking the participant for her words, Cuello pronounces to the group, "the more we read, the more we expand our vocabulary." This, she emphasizes, enriches assemblies, allowing participants to respond with more descriptive words than simply "good", or "bad".

⁴⁶⁵ Becerra later tells me that MEVIR uses a white primer because it best helps the brick absorb the paint in the sun, and because it is easier for maintenance purposes. He explains that the participants at a subsequent assembly will choose between a few options, limited in variety due to storage constraints at Tomkinson.

Cuello asks the group how they liked the Castores and what they meant to the participants. Isabel, often the first to respond, says she had more contact with them at the store than on the obra. Karina, another participant, mentions how they walked on the makeshift sidewalks to get into houses. The consensus is that the Castores, though they put in good work, interacted mainly amongst themselves. Cuello uses the example of the Castores to help explain the idea of comfort zones and being on one's phone. At which point, and to collective comic relief, a participant pulls out his flip phone, exclaiming that he is proud of his device because if no one calls him, he does not use it.

Becerra explains that the time of day varies when drawings are conducted. Though it will be an occasion for celebration, participants will likely spend some of that day on the obra. He announces all the houses will be roofed over the next month, and that it will be important to keep houses open during working hours for ventilation. He encourages the group to take advantage of as much sun as possible in order to maintain dryness from rain and humidity. For example, if you see that windows are wet, he says, open them.

Isabel reads off a list of tasks that will be completed on the obra along the next month, such as electrical installation. The mention of electricity prompts Cuello to mention that MEVIR will, after the drawing, send a list of each participant family to the UTE and the OSE, in order to set up contracts for their parcel. Becerra clarifies that this is important. Problems could arise if families have outstanding debts with the utility companies. They need thus to be on top of any discrepancy, especially given the short time window. Even though participants begin as renters, Becerra makes clear to the group that "You, not MEVIR, are the clients of the UTE and the OSE".

As she adjourns the assembly, Cuello announces that she will be in the obra office for the rest of the afternoon so that families can update their bank of hours and they can check in one-on-one for personal queries.⁴⁶⁶

As Cuello meets with participants, I accompany Becerra on another tour around the obra. “It’s not worth checking e-mails now”, Becerra says, “because I’ll get submerged. I’ll do that when I get back to Montevideo.” We enter many of the houses and chat briefly with the participants working. In one house, two participants are smoothing the floors with a water-cement mixture. Becerra advises them that scrubbing an actual lemon, even more than a lemon-scented cleaner, will be the best way to keep the floors pristine once they move in. In another house, Becerra points out how if you scrub the water-cement mixture in the bathroom, you run the danger of cement drying within the pipes. As we continue walking, Becerra says that his only critique of this version of MEVIR homes is that the roof awning does not extend farther, in order to provide more shade.

15 August 2022

When we arrive at the obra, we are surprised by a visit from Martín Castro, the *capataz general*. I accompany him and Becerra for a review of the obra, and then I chat with Castro more to learn about his new position and about his father, Ramón. Even in his role as a monitor and advisor, Martín Castro instinctively lends a hand. As we head from the obra to the assembly after lunch, he is loading concrete planks with Adán on Adán’s truck.

Today’s assembly is straight forward. We cover the upcoming drawing, now confirmed for 1 September, the naming of the neighborhood, and a couple housekeeping items. Cuello

⁴⁶⁶ Cuello remarks on the drive back that many participants left their permanent jobs to become MEVIR participants and are living off odd jobs during the obra. Some families have lost half their income, but Cuello, from both optimism and experience, says that because so many of them are young, they will be able to return to full-time employment.

begins by welcoming a new “participant” present today, another newborn baby. Participants are excited today about the upcoming drawing where they find out which home will be theirs. Cuello asks what time of day they would like it to take place. Unlike the inauguration, whose schedule is determined by the availability of political authorities, the drawing, Cuello affirms, is a family affair. And, while open to the public, it is not a political act, and thus can remain more flexible in its timing. Isabel suggests the afternoon, so that participants do not have to return to the obra on the same day. Cuello explains how the drawing will work, with families separated into different pots depending on how many bedrooms they will have. She tells them that families will have thirty minutes to look at the houses they have been drawn, both on the map and in person. They can use that time to switch with another family on mutual verbal agreement. After these thirty minutes, the obra committee members will sign to confirm the results.

“What will we name the neighborhood?”, Cuello asks, opening her arms. Three participants come forward with proposals, sharing with the group why they find the nominations to be a worthy namesake. They then write the names with a marker on a large piece of paper on Cuello’s table-atop-table rig. José, the eldest of the participants, suggests Dr. Hugo Dibarboure, a native of Florida the departmental capital. Dibarboure worked at Capilla’s polyclinic, which is now named for him. He had also worked as a doctor in Spain (which I later learn was something he did while in exile from Uruguay’s dictatorship).⁴⁶⁷ José recalls how Dibarboure “attended to everyone”. Viviana offers Gabriel “el Gaucho” Rodríguez as her candidate. El Gaucho’s parents were participants in the first MEVIR plan in Capilla. He was a constant presence in town and always willing to lend a hand to his neighbors. He passed away recently from a terminal illness.

⁴⁶⁷ José is one of the few participants who does not hail from the area. He was born in Colonia and moved to Montevideo at age five. As a young man, he got a job in the port of Montevideo, where he worked for 25 years. When he retired from the port, he came to Capilla, where his daughter was living, and worked for another ten years as a plumber.

Laura suggests Sonia Dávila, a *maestra*. Sonia was already retired when Laura met her, but Laura remembers fondly how she always helped her with her homework. Isabel chimes in that she was one of several in the group who benefited from Sonia's tutelage. Laura also writes down two other names put forward by other participants. Carolina Turrión was a friend of many in the group. She died in her mid-twenties of cancer. Laura starts crying when she says that the whole town contributed to a benefit event in her memory. Zapican Rodríguez had a bar in town, and he helped out a lot, often organizing and holding benefit events.



Figure 19: Participants in Capilla del Sauce choose a name for their neighborhood. The social worker Silvia Cuello (in the middle) facilitates (photo by author, 15 August 2022).

Becerra, meanwhile, is sitting with me at a distance from the group. He makes one of his many astute side observations, this time about public health. He notes that women in towns like Capilla tend to be fatter than the men. He attributes this to a culture of sedentarism and poor nutrition. The men are in better shape, he notes, because they are more physically active as rural laborers.

Cuello asks the group what voting method they prefer. "*Papelito cada uno*" is the agreed upon response. José walks around the room offering his cap. Each participant writes their choice on a slip of paper and places it in the hat. Camila, a participant, reads the names she draws, and Isabel adds the tallies onto the sheet next to the names listed. "El Gaucho" wins by 18 votes to Carolina's 16. The other options only receive a smattering of votes. Cuello asks the group to start collecting stories about El Gaucho. The participant closest to Becerra and me adds that El Gaucho had tongue cancer and talked less and less in his later years. He must have been in his early fifties when he died.

Paint is the next matter on which to vote. Cuello asks if everyone looked at the color options. Becerra states it is important that the colors do not turn pale in the sun. Cuello uses an expression akin to the saying, "speak now or forever hold your peace". Becerra says that we need to decide on the paint because it takes some advance organization. He tells the story of an obra where a color won by one vote. The vast majority today choose terra cotta. A few opt for green, and none go for gray or black.

The anticipation for the inauguration is clear, and participants are eager to ask more questions about it. Viviana inquires whether families can put up curtains in their homes before inauguration day. Becerra responds that capataces do not like to give over the keys ahead of time.

As a last order of business, the assembly with the agronomist on trees is announced for 13 September.

After the assembly, I spend a couple hours doing a task called “*lechazo*” with a couple of participants. Lechazo refers to spreading and sealing the water-cement mixture in the gaps between the tiles. An oficial with the surname Pacheco (oficiales are routinely referred to by their surnames rather than their given names) instructs me on the most efficient method.

1 September 2022

Today is all about the drawing determining which family gets what home. It is also the sole time I have the chance to visit Tomkinson. Alejandro Sandobal has left a tub of paint with the Tomkinson security guard for Becerra to pick up and bring to the obra. Becerra uses this moment to illustrate the intimacy of MEVIR as a workplace. “At bigger institutions, this doesn’t happen,” he says. Cuello adds that “sometimes in MEVIR we feel on an island compared to our friends in other institutions.” Becerra refers to the “pharaonic” structure of Uruguay’s ministries, *entes autonomos* like the UTE and the OSE, and intendencias. He recalls Margarita Lasarte’s experience when MEVIR was summoned for a flood recovery project in Durazno (see the next chapter for more on MEVIR’s involvement in disaster relief). She found the intendencia to be extremely slow compared to MEVIR. It rotated oficiales between other jobs and lacked a methodology for how it was going to complete the process of building with a vulnerable population.

Setting up for the drawing is another moment where participants have agency. When we arrive, the club is filled with tables covered in white tablecloths that participants have set up. We are short on chairs, however, so Becerra calls Adán, and within minutes two oficiales bring some additional ones over from the galpón. The participants have done their part to make this an event.

They have set up three Styrofoam boards. On one, there is a sheet of paper with a marker for participants to write down the emotions (“intrigue”, “nerves” “joy”) they are feeling today. On another, participants have pinned photos of various moments in the obra. On a third board is the site plan, so that the families can see the disposition of the houses, and so that Becerra can inscribe each family’s name on the relevant home they are drawn. In the bar area at the back end of the club, where during a *raid* dance whisky in highballs is ordered in abundance, participants have set down multi-liter bottles of soda pop and Styrofoam trays of cold pizza (a rectangular flatbread covered with a thin layer of tomato sauce and sometimes mozzarella cheese) and other finger foods that are common to social gatherings in the interior.

The drawing will take place at the opposite end of the hall. Cuello has brought cloth bags with the MEVIR logo from which the results will be drawn. She spent the previous evening preparing them. She explains to me that these *bolsitas* are the same bags that have been used at every drawing since she started at MEVIR in the late 1990s.

As Cuello organizes the materials and paperwork for the drawing, she tells me about a participant family in this plan, one with an eight-year-old daughter who has a medical condition akin to severe Tourette’s. At the beginning of the obra, they were considering dropping out, as they were worried about disturbing neighbors. Cuello explained to them that in MEVIR we all work together to find solutions. Before the drawing, the family brought up the issue again and asked if they could have a more isolated house, noting that they had been working with a psychiatrist in the meantime. Cuello asked her supervisors in Montevideo, and they approved. She then shared this information with the entire group of participants who voiced no objections. This particular family thus came into the drawing knowing which house they would receive. Yet, for ceremonial purposes, Cuello explains, they will still be drawn their home symbolically today.

Participants and their families and friends trickle into the Club Social. The presence of lots of young children running around and screaming contrasts with the adults who sit quietly. As several grade school aged boys show off their light-up sneakers, Becerra comments to me that “all these kids will grow up in good houses.”

The first words from the microphone belong to Cuello. “Today is a day of celebration for all of us. We celebrate working together for extraordinary things. But you’re not here for me to blabber. You’re here for the *bolillas* (balls to be drawn)”. She reads the official act provided by MEVIR and then lists the houses by the number of their bedrooms and she reads the names of the families. She announces to all what she said to the group at the previous assembly. We will do the drawing first. Then families can look at their drawn home, and come back and make changes as agreed upon.

One bag, which Adán holds, has *bolillas* inscribed with the number of the house. Another bag, which Federica the *prevencionista* holds, contains the family names written on pieces of paper. We let different children come up and draw the names. Becerra writes them down on the site plan and Cuello writes them down in a notebook. All told, there is one home with one bedroom, and one home designed for a wheelchair user, both of which, like the medical case recounted above, will be drawn symbolically. The remainder of the inventory consists of 24 homes with two bedrooms and eight homes with three bedrooms. The two-bedroom and three-bedroom groups have separate bags. The drawing starts with the two-bedroom homes and finishes with the three-bedroom homes. When each family’s name is called, they walk up to the stage to a round of applause and an embrace from a gleeful Cuello.

Once the drawing is over, there is a rush to the board so that families can make sense of where on the site they will be living. To Cuello’s contentment and surprise, not a single family

asks to swap their home. When she asks if all are happy with the house they have been drawn, there is a collective cheer of “¡Si!” Cuello then re-reads the notarial act now that the residents have been assigned their homes. Isabel and the two other obra delegates come up to sign on behalf of the group.



Figure 20: Participants in Capilla del Sauce react to finding out which home will be theirs (photo by author, 1 September 2022).

However, the ceremony does not conclude with the confirmation of which family receives what particular house. Representing the participants, Isabel gives a gift to all the oficiales and technical team, including one to myself. Each of us receives a commemorative keychain with the MEVIR logo, the inscription “Capilla del Sauce MEVIR IV 2022” and our names. Federica later comments to me that while she is flattered to receive a personal and sentimental gift, she is disappointed by the implicit gender discrimination. The keychains for men include a bottle opener, but those for women do not.

Now that the official event is over, families linger over soft drinks, finger food, and cumbia blaring at full blast, although few bother to get up from their seats to dance. Becerra and I sit on the edge of the stage, taking in the scene. As Cuello makes the rounds greeting each of the families, Becerra reflects that these drawings for houses are when he sees his social worker colleagues at their happiest. While gladly interacting with any families who approach him, he does not immerse himself in the crowd to the same extent as Cuello. “If I talk too much to oficiales and participants”, he says, “they will ask me for things [that detract from the aims and scope of my job], and by keeping my distance I avoid encouraging that.”

As we drive back to Montevideo in the rain, Cuello expresses her pleasure at two stalwarts of the obra. Karina and the aptly named Tormenta (“Storm”) are having a “contagious effect” on the rest of the group. They have completed far more hours of work than the required amount. Cuello has told them they deserve to take a bit of a break, but they insist on continuing to work. She does acknowledge that their personal life situations make it easier for them to come continuously to the obra than most of their peers. I ask Cuello if there is any reward for their putting in extra hours. She responds that for a surplus of up to 600 hours, you do not have to make rent payments for the first six months.

13 September 2022

As we turn onto the divided highway of Ruta 5 in the outskirts of Montevideo, Becerra and I return to a familiar topic: the shortcomings of Uruguayan clubs in the Copa Libertadores, South America's premier club soccer tournament. Since Peñarol won its fifth title in 1987 and Nacional its third, in 1988, only once has an Uruguayan club reached the final, with Peñarol losing to Neymar-led Santos of Brazil in 2011. He argues the only way for Uruguayan clubs to become competitive is if Uruguayan stars return from Europe in their early thirties rather than their mid-thirties. "What is an extra hundred million Euros to Fede Valverde?" Becerra asks.

Changing the subject, he inquires whether Cuello is keeping the rental car tomorrow. "Yes," she replies. "Where are you going?" he asks. "Let me think," she pauses to process her busy travel schedule, "...Ahh San Ramón! 327 people signed up for the nucleus and they still haven't finished all the interviews." This is an example of MEVIR taking for granted travelling long distances, even when avoidable by staying the night somewhere. Going back to Montevideo to spend the night only to return to San Ramón the next day would involve three hours of backtracking.

Turning off of Ruta 5 onto more rural roads in Canelones, Becerra comments on the abundance of MEVIR unidades productivas and area rural homes, including some for which he was the architect. We spot men riding on horseback parallel to the road, a not uncommon sight in Uruguay's interior. This prompts Cuello to recollect that in earlier inaugurations, many people arrived on horseback. She would like to revive this tradition in Capilla and will propose this to the participants today.

As Cuello and I pick up milanesas and *galletas de chicharrón* at Falero in San Ramón, Becerra is on the phone with Martín Fajardo, the capataz in Ombúes de Lavalle, about whether

he might need to pick up supplies in Tomkinson for a trip to Ombúes tomorrow (Tomkinson is fortunately on the way to Ombúes). Becerra may be on the way to one obra, but that does not excuse him from tending to another.

Technically speaking, there are two assemblies today. Given the subject matter, which is tree planting, the first takes place outside. We are seated in a circle of plastic chairs, placed next to the galpón de obra. We luck out as it is a clear, sunny day. Tree planting is a great example of how MEVIR teaches participants. The added value to participants of having a MEVIR home is not just the sweat equity and the pride derived from having built it, but also that participants learn so much in the construction process. Tree planting is a skill ostensibly tangential to working in construction, yet MEVIR has found a way to make it complementary. Moreover, tree planting is a conscious physical act of placemaking, one linking the built and natural environments into the whole that MEVIR seeks to create.

Two guests who Becerra refers to only by their nicknames are here to lead the tree planting discussion and demonstration. These are the MEVIR agronomist Alfredo “el Chino” Irureta and Carlos “el Indio” Torres, another agronomist who serves as the forestry technician of the Intendencia of Florida.⁴⁶⁸

Irureta starts by asking a general question, “why do trees matter?” The collectively gathered answers include “beauty”, “heritage”, “environment”, and “energy efficiency”. With a favorable opinion of trees firmly established, Irureta moves onto the first practical matter by asking in his deep voice, “what kind of trees do we plant”? There is both a general answer and a specific one. Rather than going straight to the species of tree he deems best for MEVIR, he

⁴⁶⁸ In a coincidence typical of the interior, Torres arrives in an official vehicle of the Intendencia of Florida with the same driver who took me around MEVIR plans in the dairy belt in June. There is a broader question of why intendencia employees, beyond the intendente, need a driver. I have no critique of the service the driver provides, but I see this as a case where resources could be better diverted towards development efforts.

generates a discussion on what makes a species suitable. Following a series of notes titled “how to choose the species”, he covers the following guidelines:

- Deciduous trees are recommended*
- Avoid species with spines or allergens* (“The choice of species is also about your health”, he says to the crowd).
- Choose species that are not susceptible to disease*
- Consider the size they reach, their shape, and the presence of fruits*
- Choose species that are resistant to frosts*
- Inform yourself on the tree ordinances of your department*

Torres interjects that what you plant should be larger than a bush, but small enough to support pruning. When asked by a participant how many trees should be planted, Irureta responds “more or less one per paved path leading to each home”, thus around 34 in total. “We’ll do a practice planning”, he says.

Prefacing his recommendations, Irureta reviews a list of which trees not to plant, focusing on trees that are likely to come to the fore of the minds of participants. First on the list is the very tree that gives Capilla del Sauce its name, the willow. A *sauce*, he explains, is too tall and its roots look for water. Rounding out the do-not-plant species list are poplar, ficus, sweetgum, *timbó* (the pacara earpod tree), *lapacho* (pink trumpet tree), eucalyptus (which he later explains is dangerous to have next to a home), plane-trees, cypress, elm, and linden.

Cuello asks about *anacahuíta*, which is not on Irureta’s list, and Torres says these are not suitable due to wind resistance, among other reasons.⁴⁶⁹ Torres continues to explain that *plátanos*, the London planes ubiquitous in Montevideo, are planted in cities in part for their air filtration properties. Cuello jokes that there are not many buses passing by here in Capilla.

⁴⁶⁹ The “anacahuíta” to which Cuello refers is most likely the species *Schinus molle*, native to Southern South America, that yields bright-pink peppercorns, not the white-flowered shrub species *Cordia boissieri* native to South Texas and northeastern Mexico, which Mexicans call “anacahuíta”.

Finally, Irureta announces the two trees best suited to planting in a MEVIR nucleus. These are *espumilla* (crepe-myrtle), and a more local species, the *lapachillo*, a yellow-flowering plant of the Fabaceae family. This of course, does not prevent participants from choosing other options to accompany the *espumillas* the team will begin planting today. Irureta notes that ashes are the easiest to plant when you are collaborating with intendencias. He also recommends to participants to plant fruit trees on their parcels. Torres adds that those who opt to plant a peach tree will need the knowledge of how to prune.

Cuello asks if the *espumillas* have reddish-pink flowers and Irureta shows a photo to confirm that they do. Cuello exclaims to the group, “when they bloom, send me pictures!” Irureta explains that these trees will be ready in three years, while other types of trees may take up to ten or fifteen years.

Irureta next covers where to plant the trees, urging participants that these should not interfere with pipes, street corners (for reasons of visibility), street lighting or the entryways for cars. The trees we are planting now, he says, are to go in the tree lawn between the street and the sidewalk. Later, the participants can plant on their own parcels.

Irureta and Torres continue by discussing maintenance, with Torres explaining how trees need humidity, though too much or too little water is harmful to them. Irureta shares that MEVIR made a *convenio* with the UTU for composting, something that can help participants grow a family vegetable garden. Cuello interjects to say that she will continue to visit Capilla for the first few months of the post-obra stage. There will still be area rural homes to finish, and she and Becerra will be present to help with this kind of thing. Irureta warns participants to treat their trees properly, avoiding hammering nails into them, placing advertisements on them, or painting them.



Figure 21: From left to right, the social worker Silvia Cuello and the agronomists Carlos Torres and Alfredo Irureta instruct participants in Capilla del Sauce on tree planting (photo by author, 13 September 2022).

At the time of this tree discussion, there are only a few specks of grass in the dirt surrounding the homes. However, as Irureta announces, this will soon change. “*Queremos verde*

rápido” (We want green fast), he says, with the caveat that we are outside of grass planting season right now because the heat will soon arrive.⁴⁷⁰ Irureta tells the participants that once grass is planted, they should avoid stepping on it during the early stages, so that it grows properly. Irureta encourages participants to water the grass when it does not rain and to keep it short.

We move half a block down from our chairs next to the galpón de obra to stand in front of one of the homes. Torres begins the tree planting demonstration, explaining how to be careful by opening the plastic covering of the roots with a knife and telling participants it is important that the roots do not get air. Following Torres’s lead, participants take turns breaking up the clumps of dirt to put in the hole. Torres explains to a participant the importance of not wetting the tree before they take it out of the bag. Moreover, Irureta gives advice specific to rural Uruguay, “you will put a *tejido* (web) around the tree so that cows don’t eat it.” Torres also warns to watch out for ants. With one of the demonstration trees, Irureta suggests taping together two branches so that they do not stray. We continue down the block planting the demonstration trees. At each house, participants have a chance to improve their tree planting skills in an iterative process.

Adán, who stops by, tells us that his team has so far dug holes for fifteen trees. Irureta makes sure that we bring the remaining trees inside the galpón to avoid the elements. Torres has to leave and Irureta reminds him that they will be doing the same presentation soon in La Cruz, Florida, where another MEVIR plan will be inaugurated. I ask Irureta if he would like to join Cuello, Becerra, and I for lunch, but he politely declines as he has a four-hour drive back to his home in Fray Bentos.

⁴⁷⁰ Grass planting is another example where the seasonality of an obra matters. A contrast with Capilla del Sauce could not have been more apparent at the inauguration I attended in Casupá on 29 February 2024, where the new homes were surrounded with green grass.

After lunch, an abundance of bicycles lean against the curb in front of the Club Social, where participants soak in some pre-assembly sun. As Cuello arrives with a carry-on suitcase serving as a briefcase, participants trickle into the club. This time it is Cuello who sets the tone by connecting to the group via the latest football results, “*no vamos a hablar de Peñarol, porque vamos a llorar*” (let’s not talk about Peñarol, because if we do, we’ll start crying). Once everyone is seated down, she asks if the group has any news. Isabel mentions something about getting the sidewalks ready. Maricel, a participant who is also on the obra commission, reads the latest update on what has been completed. The subject of putting the hornero plaques on the homes is raised. Becerra brought these with him in the rental car today and has left them with Adán. Cuello confides to the group that capataces get nervous at this final stage of the obra. There is a lot going on, and different people from outside the obra, such as the UTE and the OSE, show up to put on finishing touches.

Cuello says that the technical team has decided on 13 October, a month from today, as the date that will work best for the inauguration, but they are awaiting confirmation from MEVIR authorities. She explains the general schedule for the inauguration, which will last around an hour and a half.

After running through these basic issues, she reaches the question for which she has been waiting, “Would you like to organize a parade on horseback to arrive at the inauguration?” Héctor, a participant pleased with the idea and skilled with quick wit, jokes that they should have named the neighborhood after Cuello. Cuello responds, “remember I said that trust is built over time. Do things because you want them. I am not going to make you have horses just because I want them.” A more cautious participant warns that it might be harder to obtain enough horses on

a weekday. Cuello counters with her can-do attitude, saying “stop with those *uruguayezes*.”⁴⁷¹ After continued discussion on the matter, the majority eventually votes to approve a horse parade.



Figure 22: Outside the Club Social Capilla del Sauce, participants await the social worker Silvia Cuello (carrying suitcase) before an assembly (photo by author, 13 September 2022).

⁴⁷¹ Cuello’s implication (remember her comments in a previous assembly) is that Uruguayans are prone to making excuses to justify putting in the minimum amount of effort. She is far from unique among the Uruguayans I know in making such an assessment.

Coincidentally, Cuello gets a WhatsApp message from Carina Folle, MEVIR's director of communications, that the inauguration is confirmed for 13 October. The participants immediately ask what time it will take place, and Cuello sends Folle an audio back with their request.

Isabel has drafted a speech for the inauguration about Gabriel "el Gaucho" Rodríguez, which she reads to a round of applause. Cuello's suggested editing exhibits her spin of positivity, "saying that he had cancer leaves us sad, but it should be up to you." Karina, who has been working with Isabel, agrees, "we don't want his family to get sad," and Isabel changes "cancer" to "terminal illness."

After Cuello reads a new message from Folle, one confirming the inauguration will take place at 11 AM, she reminds the group there will be a *fiesta* following the ceremony. "*Que bajón*" (what a disappointment), Cuello jokes, "that you haven't organized a party yet." In one of the few instances where Cuello refers to me, she teases the group how I commented to her and Becerra after the drawing that they did not dance very much. A participant responds "we have to have alcohol." Another quips, "with Coke we talk, with wine we drink." Cuello asks about music, and Isabel says that they are getting permission from the *intendencia* to bring a band to the club.

Before moving to further procedural matters, Cuello conjures more excitement about the inauguration, by reflecting on how far the participants have come as a group now willing to speak their minds, advocate for themselves, and enjoy each other's company. "Do you remember," she asks, "your first day on the obra just how quiet and afraid you were?"

The main item to be covered along the rest of the afternoon is rental contracts. Cuello sits down and reads a sample contract to the group. As a way of alleviating the tedium of this, she pauses often to annotate and to give room for comments and questions. To the credit of the

participants, none of them are dozing off. One of the annotations Cuello makes recognizes that some intendencias are more flexible with respect to deed signing. She explains that you can pay multiple installments per month if you want to get ahead on your rent payments, but that it must be a whole number of installments, not a partial one, say, 1.5. When not living in the home (if you are subleasing it, for example), you have to pay more. Telling the unlikely story of a participant family winning the *Cinco de Oro*, a popular Uruguayan lottery game, Cuello exhorts the group to be better than the typical Uruguayan, who does not like to pay more than the minimum amount.⁴⁷² Six missed installments in a row, and families will receive a *cese* (cessation). This does not bring an immediate eviction, but it does give MEVIR the right to take the case to court. Cuello adds that a trial carries its costs for participants, at least 6000 pesos (\$150) up front. MEVIR, she says, knows that families who work in the campo will often be away from their home for weeks at a time. However, there is a spirit of the law to honor that you do not leave your home vacant for months on end, especially since there are other families who could benefit from using it.

Cuello runs down a list of things families cannot do while MEVIR is still the owner, such as building additions to the home. She also covers the more intangible responsibilities of living in a MEVIR home. These include warning against doing such things as keeping a horse in a bedroom, or having a business that generates too much noise.

Héctor asks what families will do with the fencing that will separate the houses (the concrete posts to which the wire will be tied have already been placed). Cuello responds that we do not want stray dogs. She then pauses and uses this question as a chance to summon Becerra back into the club; he has been outside, talking on the phone to the UTE and the OSE. Becerra

⁴⁷² In Uruguayan vernacular, “*ganar el Cinco de Oro*” means to win the lottery or the jackpot.

greet everyone on his entry as he had not previously spoken. “I love what I do. It is not everyday that a person builds their own home. The drawing was very emotional for me.”

Returning to the gist of Héctor’s question, Becerra broaches the matter of walls residents can build around their homes. “Each department has different codes, but I don’t know all nineteen off the top of my head. There is no exact height that all of them need to be, though if they are taller than two meters, you need a more complex armed concrete structure”, he signals. “You also don’t want to deprive your neighbors of sunlight”, he warns.

Cuello uses this moment to bring the physical back to the social. “Don’t forget to talk to your neighbor. You don’t want to find out first from MEVIR that your neighbor is building a wall. Good communication avoids totally unnecessary conflicts. Conversing is a baseline of respect and accountability”. Becerra then comments on drainage, wanting participants to make sure that they do not get water in the wrong places. A participant asks a very practical question about where they should place their DirectTV antennas? “Not against the *aplacado* (tiles),” Becerra responds. Cuello adds that the same is true for air conditioning units.

After the assembly, Becerra takes me to check up on the progress on the planta urbana home of Vázquez, Capilla’s highest-ranking policeman. Becerra explains to me a peculiarity of local land use, one that provides an example of MEVIR’s deftness. The plots next to Vázquez’s house are owned by the same man who owns the corner lot where the galpón de obra is sited. Becerra shows me the white pipes that mark the corners of the property line. Since the man did not have his papers in order, the property transfer could not happen with money. Instead, MEVIR and he drafted an agreement, one where MEVIR would clear his two plots of overgrowth in exchange for the galpón site.

After making his rounds of planta urbana homes, Becerra takes me to a viewpoint next to Capilla's cell tower. From here we look down on the 34 nearly-completed homes, which are lit by the late afternoon sun. "*Postales del país* (postcards of the country)", he exclaims. "*Esto es el mejor del Uruguay* (This is the best of Uruguay)". As we watch ruminants forage on natural grasses, Becerra and I do our own rumination on the built landscape. MEVIR's mastery of scale is apparent from this chosen vantage point. Becerra argues MEVIR cannot forget about scale going forward. All the people getting these homes will not have to be aliens in the city, he remarks. They can instead continue living in the place form where their culture is drawn.



Figure 23: View of the obra in Capilla del Sauce a month before completion (photo by author, 13 September 2022).

After this peaceful moment of reflection, the reality of shepherding the obra and all its variables to completion returns. In the office of the galpón, Becerra calls a contractor, one who needs to deliver a product to the obra in a timely fashion. Knowing how timelines work within this business, Becerra tells a white lie, claiming that the inauguration is set for 7 October rather than the thirteenth. This, he says to me afterwards, eliminates MEVIR's margin for error.

3 October 2022

Becerra spent the weekend with extended family in Salto, returning sick to Montevideo, and thus is not with us today. On the drive up from the capital, Cuello recounts the latest turn of events in the Julio saga, which I had figured was long settled. Julio was finally able to visit a doctor, but the BPS refused to give him his pension, since the doctor did not deem him sufficiently incapacitated.

Cuello had travelled to Capilla the previous Thursday. I did not accompany her. I elected instead to observe the meeting with local actors in Chuy (see the previous chapter) (fieldwork requires tradeoffs). She debriefs me on a couple things I had missed that might be useful to me. Cuello and Isabel visited the family of "el Gaucho" to learn more about the man for whom the neighborhood will be named. The participants gathered for a talk on the subject of heaters, to be given by a man named José, who runs a family heating company in San José. Cuello and José showed a video and then took their audience to a house and demonstrated how to clean a stove there. But the most eventful part of the talk concerning heaters was an unexpected encounter of old friends. Adán had worked alongside José as agricultural laborers in San José when they were both young. Now José runs a business with his two sons. Each son is a university-graduated accountant and the business has nationwide clients. Adán expressed to Cuello how delighted he was to see José "*salir adelante*", to have made a good life for himself.

When we arrive at the obra, Adán explains to me the meaning of the red and white flags attached to the galpón that he hoists up and down. One flag indicates that tools need to be washed and the other that it is time to come in for break. An official chats with me about preparing the cesspits, which currently dot the scene of the obra.



Figure 24: The social worker Silvia Cuello leads participants in a game to help them identify and process feelings in advance of moving into their homes (photo by author, 3 October 2022).

Today's assembly is less practical and more reflective. Cuello leads the participants in a game where they put sticky notes containing a one-word emotion on their foreheads. It is each person's task to guess what the note says. Cuello then asks them how they feel, prefacing how "*somos seres emocionales* (we are emotional beings)". "The idea", she says, "is that we all transmit distinct emotions to those around us. You will have neighbors in the neighborhood, and we are building a neighborhood". Cuello, it occurs to me in this moment, puts both the "social" and the "work" in social work. Through her words and her actions, she makes explicit the value of working hard to improve oneself and the value of making the most of the company of those around you.

Cuello divides participants into four groups based on the colors of their sticky notes. Each group discusses the five topics listed on a piece of paper, and then reports back to the group as a whole.

1. *List five emotions you felt during the first week of the obra*
2. *What the experience of working with MEVIR has left with us*
3. *How do we imagine our new neighborhood will be*
4. *Aspects to improve on this experience*
5. *A message you would like to leave for MEVIR*

As I walk around the club, I notice that the groups are writing honest and thoughtful answers, but very short ones. Words trump sentences. In the at-large discussion, Cuello does a good job of probing beyond their initial brevity. She asks, "*when* did you feel that emotion?" for example.

Participants in multiple groups express that MEVIR could be more demanding, though whether this is about physical labor or other commitments to the cause is left unclear. Tiredness is a common theme. Another one is patience. Multiple participants share how they learned to be more patient after redoing building tasks. They had done these incorrectly the first time and

needed the help of the oficiales teach them again. One group shares how they learned to be more punctual and show more empathy. Gerardo, a participant who has worked laying fences, is grateful that he learned on the obra how to lay an entirely different type of fence. Isabel makes the important point that there is a challenging learning curve when doing a type of work you have not done before.

Responding to the last two items, Tormenta's group suggests that there should be more equality with respect to the rent payments (participants have talked amongst themselves and realized that they will not all be paying the same amount). Many participants also regret that there is no "*plazita*", or little park, that is *tranquilo* (calm) and *recreativo* (good for recreation), built with this plan (Capilla's first and second MEVIR plans have a plazita).

Each group is also tasked with creating and performing a sketch that helps them to make sense of what they have experienced during the obra. One group does a spot-on spoof of Adán, one where he gives direct, laconic instructions, while brandishing a pen in his right hand. Isabel's group brings a couple of brooms and they begin sweeping the floor, encouraging the rest to keep the neighborhood quiet and clean. After the skits are over, Cuello brings the parody back to reality. "These things you are laughing about now will come up week after week." A participant then duly broaches the topic of gossip. Cuello responds that "living together resembles what you've learned in working together."⁴⁷³

The discussion goes back to aspects to improve. Isabel returns to the point made about rent payments, suggesting that MEVIR should make the cost of each installment equal for all participants. This opinion receives a round of applause. She also argues that MEVIR should be

⁴⁷³ I ask Cuello later how she personally thinks gossip is dealt with best. She explains she tries to get participants to think about "rumor" and what that means for different people. Like much of her job, in her words this is a matter of "*trabajar conceptos* (working on concepts)."

stricter about making sure each family does its hours.⁴⁷⁴ Cuello responds that she will share all of this with her supervising social workers (Teresa Sangiovanni, Adrian Berdía, and Adriana Sena) and she then proceeds to explain the rationale of MEVIR's rent payment policy. A lively, though respectful exchange ensues with Isabel. She makes the cogent observation that all the houses (number of bedrooms aside) have the same value. MEVIR is guided, explains Cuello, by the premise that everyone is able to pay their *cuota* (monthly rental installment). Cuotas depend on one's family makeup and earning potential and this is a state policy, she declares. Isabel's curiosity continues. "How long has this been the case?" she asks. "At least since I started 24 years ago", Cuello answers. Cuello then makes the interesting point that in areas where rural laborers predominate, there is little variation in salaries, and therefore cuotas do not differ that much. She explains that the previous MEVIR board had made family size a more important factor in determining cuotas, but that the current administration reverted to giving greater weight to economic factors. Even between these two policies, Cuello clarifies, there is not that much of a difference.⁴⁷⁵ She wisely then brings back discussion from policy matters to personal ones. "I shook the first time I bought a car. I am saying this to show empathy. Debt can be scary. I once saw a family with severe housing need opt not to sign the contract because they were too afraid of financial commitment."⁴⁷⁶ "MEVIR is designed for you to be able to pay," she underscores. "The idea is that the cuota becomes less of your income over time. Cuotas are less than rents."⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁴ Where to draw the line between keeping absentee families in the group and ejecting them is an important debate within MEVIR, and not one that I have heard any definitive answer about.

⁴⁷⁵ Granted, Cuello was not expecting this detailed of a discussion on rent payments, having never received such a question publicly from a participant in 24 years at MEVIR. However, MEVIR social workers could do well, just in case and for the purposes of transparency, to prepare a diagram of how payments are calculated to show to participants.

⁴⁷⁶ This is not the only time I heard a MEVIR technician express that cautiousness towards making a financial commitment is a reason why some families either do not apply for MEVIR or drop out during the obra.

⁴⁷⁷ Cuello does not clarify in this instance whether the idea that rent payments become less and less of one's income over time comes on account of MEVIR progressively lowering the payments in real terms or results from the participants amassing more income over time.

The evidence shows that you will grow and overcome your fears. The cuota does not go up like market rate rents.”

After establishing the rationale for customized rent payments, Cuello moves to the subject of the inauguration. “Who wants to say a few words?” she asks. “Isabel is already talking about El Gaucho, so let’s have it be someone else.” There are no takers, but Cuello says that we will settle this by conducting a random drawing. Mario, another participant expert in comic relief, offers his *boina* as the vessel from which names are drawn.

Cuello previews more of what needs to happen before the inauguration. “Next Tuesday, I’ll be here all day. We can sign OSE contracts.” On the subject of the OSE, she informs participants of a key detail and an example of how MEVIR mediates the scale of the department. “When you pay your OSE, don’t go to Sarandí del Yí because we have a *convenio* with Florida.” Finally, there is a long discussion about who is riding in the horse parade. “If there are only three horses, let there be three horses,” Cuello concludes.

After the assembly, Cuello and I take advantage of the sun to *bizochear* by the Arroyo Sauce del Yi creek a couple football fields length in distance from the nucleus. The participants of Capilla plan four are lucky to have this setting so close to their homes. There are a few benches and picnic tables, some of them covered, and even a *parrilla* for those who wish to grill. Despite being caught off guard with the conversation on cuotas, Cuello is happy with how the day went. She sees it as a sign of MEVIR working well when participants as a group are assertive about what they want. I ask her more broadly about this question of participant agency and she says that it is headed in the right direction. She gives the example of how the current MEVIR administration responded to participant input by allowing cuota payments via RedPagos and Abitab instead of just through Correo Uruguayo, the national postal service. This is not the

only fiscal change. Participants can now make their payment at any time during the month instead of just before the fifteenth.

Despite their long days working on an obra without other social workers, Cuello and her peers maintain close contact with their counterparts on other obras via WhatsApp. They also debrief at monthly meetings. These have become virtual sessions since the pandemic, something appreciated by many of those who formerly needed to travel from the interior to Montevideo. Cuello notes how this group of participants in Capilla del Sauce is exceptional for having a dropout level of zero families. She compares this to her Maldonado-based colleague Leticia Schiavo, who is currently working in Santa Rosa (albeit on a larger plan) who has already had twenty families renounce their participation in the program. I ask Cuello whether the impeccable record of the current Capilla plan has to do with labor markets. She says it may to some degree but sees external factors as secondary to the togetherness of this group as a motivation for continuing.⁴⁷⁸ In Capilla, she adds, “a fourth plan in a small town is a bigger deal than in a bigger one. People know what it means to have a MEVIR home.” Reflecting on the discussion about cuotas, Cuello remarks that today was the first time she could remember in 24 years when participants brought up to her the idea of equal payments for all. She understands why they would advocate for this, but she counters once the group realizes that some of their peers are poorer than the average participant, and thus disproportionately burdened by rent, they will understand better.⁴⁷⁹

As we finish our bizcochos, Cuello gets a WhatsApp audio message from a worried participant. She is upset because she interpreted Cuello as saying that people living outside the

⁴⁷⁸ Cuello points to the need for more serious analysis of the motives behind dropouts and incorporating these findings in MEVIR’s selection process.

⁴⁷⁹ In other words, with respect to rent payments, MEVIR strives for equity rather than equality.

town should not come to the inauguration. Cuello gets in the car and goes to the participant's house directly. She does this to clarify not only should her father come from out of town, but that he can ride in on his horse. After waiting in the car for five minutes, I hear laughs, and know that the matter is resolved.

There is one more thing to do before we head south. We visit Paola, a *maestra rural* whose planta urbana home has just been completed. She will give a speech at the inauguration on behalf of the non-nucleus participants, and she would like to discuss the content of the speech with Cuello. As Cuello does her best to quell Paola's nerves about public speaking, the subject of "el Gaucho", the nucleus namesake, arises. Cuello remembers an important detail. El Gaucho's daughter bakes cakes. Cuello immediately calls Isabel to ask for her number, so that she can order a cake to bring next week, with which to thank the oficiales. Cuello is on the phone longer than expected as El Gaucho's daughter asks for all sorts of details. Cuello confidently instructs her, "just bake a cake. I trust you."

11 October 2022

Three days before the inauguration, there is a jornada to tie up loose ends and help see the obra to the finish line. Adding to the intrigue, employees from the OSE and the UTE are here today. Normally the UTE and the OSE would not come on the same day; their simultaneity comes from the rush at the end of the obra. This makes things even crazier for Adán, says Becerra. UTE linemen are installing power onto the concrete poles and wires that have already been set.

Cuello occupies Adán's desk for much of the day helping participants to sign contracts, first for the OSE, and then their rental contract with MEVIR. She explains to me how there is a

special clause in the rental contract about stoves. On a plan in Lascano (Rocha), many families sold their stoves. This led MEVIR to take measures preventing this from happening elsewhere.

MEVIR's expertise in building relationships is not limited to making participants work together over the course of the obra. As Becerra explains to me when discussing the two state utility companies, MEVIR's ability to build good houses quickly is not possible without an institutional logic that values people and time with people. MEVIR field technicians are experts at this, he says. So too are many office employees. He tells me about a retired MEVIR office employee named Cristina Martínez, who worked directly on this matter and knew UTE and OSE workers across the country. Becerra does an impression of Martínez on the phone to show, just how personal her communication style was, "Oh, I ran into your son the other day on the Rambla, how great that he's studying in Montevideo...I'll have that for you tomorrow." Finished with his impression, Becerra returns to analysis via yet another soccer analogy, "You have to generate a link with the team. Everyone has to be a fan of the same team. Then you get to work."

The mood soon turns as Becerra receives a phone call. It is the head of the OSE for Florida Department telling him that the employee who was going to install water today in Capilla has killed himself. There will be a replacement employee to do the work in time for the inauguration, but in no way is this welcome news.

We eat lunch on a bench in the galpón today, as the small "comedor" where we usually eat has already been dismantled in advance of the end of the obra. Becerra talks about the differences between dry and wet construction, noting that the latter is rarely found in the United States.

After lunch, I accompany Becerra to Sarandí del Yí. Illustrating his argument about relationship building, he makes a point of visiting Graciela, who works at Sarandí's UTE office.

He wants to confirm that UTE will hook up power on time to all of the new homes in Capilla. Becerra and Graciela had been communicating by phone, but he insists on the added value of in-person communication. When he leaves the UTE office, he succinctly comments to me, “all in order.” He has one more *trámite* to conduct at the bank before we return to Capilla. I wait patiently on a bench in Sarandí’s central plaza, busier and leafier than Capilla’s.

We stop at an area rural home on the way back. Becerra explains to the participant couple (who currently live in a house on an estancia that they rent from their employer) how best to do laundry without interfering with their cesspit.

Back on the nucleus obra, the sound permeates of brooms sweeping. For participants, the last couple weeks of the obra are primarily about cleaning. The other remaining tasks, such as installing the electricity, are highly technical, requiring the work of professionals.

At the lower end of the obra, with countryside in the background and new homes to the right, oficiales have erected a temporary stage to be used at the inauguration. Becerra and Adán look at the stage pondering any last-minute adjustments after checking in with Carina Folle, who will run the event on inauguration day. On a fencepost in front of a home across from the stage, an hornero has fittingly laid its nest.

At the end of the workday, Becerra and Cuello summon Adán and the oficiales to the galpón. On a table in the middle sits the cake baked by el Gaucho’s daughter. The questions she asked Cuello on the phone now seem justified. This is a construction-themed cake that would please even the most demanding four-year-old boy at his birthday party. The edges are formed to look like bricks and mortar, and a grainy topping resembles the sand used in building.

After washing down the cake with Paso de los Toros (Uruguay’s national grapefruit soda named after the town in Tacuarembó), Becerra gives a speech reflecting on the obra. As we are

two months away from the end of the year and the holiday construction recess, it does not make sense for most oficiales to be assigned to a new permanent obra until January. Becerra tells the group not to worry, as there will still be tasks here until the end of the year, working between area rural and planta urbana homes, and tackling some repairs. He then announces, to his pleasure, that the rents of oficiales will now be managed centrally from Montevideo instead of by the field architect. He is also proud to emphasize this is a plan we started during the pandemic, something that makes getting done early an even better feat. The way Becerra talks to the oficiales is remarkably subdued. He is passionate and focused but controlled, using measured pauses and without raising his voice. He concludes by thanking them again and saying he looks forward to seeing them soon.

Cuello chimes in that the capataz makes the difference and that Adán is a great leader. Becerra uses this as an occasion to engage Adán and the oficiales on their own thoughts. He asks them what they think of these houses compared to previous models. Adán says that a lot of things were made easier. Becerra agrees, although he is skeptical about Styrofoam as an effective component of insulation for houses in this climate. He asks if any of the oficiales worked in La Charqueada? Echoing what he had already expressed as one of the only design shortcomings of the homes here, he says that the *aleros* (eaves) worked better there. He makes the point, both humorously and seriously, that the extra shade made it easier to drink yerba mate in the summer months.⁴⁸⁰ One official asks why they did not use isopanel for these homes, and he shares his experience on an obra in Cardona, Soriano. Becerra explains that the freight costs are high when transporting isopanel, a relatively lightweight material. Pacheco, another official, talks about working on an obra in Tranqueras where he built two-story houses, a short-lived experiment

⁴⁸⁰ Ironically, Becerra represents a rare case of an Uruguayan who does not drink mate.

during the previous MEVIR administration.⁴⁸¹ One of the few bearded oficiales volunteers that isopanel does a poor job of stopping winter cold. Adán gives his regards to the rest of the group, excusing himself to run an errand in Sarandí del Yi. Becerra then explains how roofs are the aspect of MEVIR houses that has changed the most over time.

As we get in the car to head back, we take one more tour around the obra to decide which house will be the best for ribbon cutting. Carina Folle needs it to be close to the stage and to be clean. As we enter Ruta 6, we notice a familiar face waiting at the southbound bus shelter. Ibis is one of the few nucleus participants who does not live in the town of Capilla itself, instead living in an isolated set of dwellings called Chilcas (whose name refers to the seepwillow plant, a common sight of overgrown vegetation on Uruguayan fields) some ten kilometers south along the highway and few more kilometers inland. We collect her and drop her off at a bus shelter, one located next to the unpaved road leading to Chilcas, where a neighbor takes her home by motorcycle.

As the sun is setting, Becerra muses it is a shame that the inauguration cannot be ten days later. He opines this not because he is stressed from the haste, but because a later date would give time for more sun, which would encourage growth of the grass that has now been planted. Cuello is tickled to share an anecdote a participant couple told her today. The wife is expecting their second child. She ventured that if it were a boy, they would name it Samuel. Cuello asked “if it was a girl, would you name it Silvia?” “No” was the answer. “Camila”.

⁴⁸¹ I ask Becerra about the two-story homes on our ride up to Capilla on the inauguration day. He says that MEVIR started building with two stories due to land shortages. The experiment petered out, when MEVIR realized it was building with typologies and a complexity beyond its logistical capability and with higher margins of error. Having a second story also creates safety concerns that make it harder to involve the non-professional participants in building. He makes the additional point that houses in the Uruguayan countryside have mainly always been single-story, in part due to extensive land use.

14 October 2022 (Inauguration Day)⁴⁸²

Preparation continues apace the day before the inauguration. Cuello sends me a picture from the obra of her with Tormenta. They are smiling and holding paintbrushes covered in blue paint.

The morning of the big day, it is not just Cuello, Becerra and I who make the trek in the rental car. For the occasion, Becerra has excused his teenage daughter Camila from school for the day so that she can have a first-hand sense of why her father is on the road so often. When Becerra worked in Paso de la Cadena, Camila was a toddler and he would leave her for the day in the care of the wife of the capataz, Mario Javier Rodríguez. Rodríguez, who hails from Young, is now retired and lives in the countryside near Paso de la Cadena. As we drive along Ruta 63 headed to San Ramón, Becerra points to the rural road you take to reach Rodríguez's home. Becerra worked in the area between Paso de la Cadena and Canelón Chico for around ten years on account of the concentration of unidades productivas that MEVIR prepared here. Becerra recalls how MEVIR had the timing down running like clockwork. "We had inaugurations every September, the call for the next group was in October, the visitations in November, and the social worker Luisa Lessa would go on vacation in December." There were altogether interventions for around 180 families in the area. One of the gas station attendants we often see when we fill up in Paso de la Cadena was a participant in one of these plans.

We arrive as early as possible so that Becerra can show Camila around the obra and introduce her to people. We are fortunate as there is not a cloud in the sky. At around 10:30, over a dozen horses and their riders gather across from Capilla's grade school, which is named after

⁴⁸² Despite having followed the obra closely throughout the year, my notes for the inauguration in Capilla are sparser than the ideal. This is in part because I was caught up in the festivities of a process with which I had been closely involved. I had also already attended three inaugurations in other towns and was familiar with the process.

Leonel Aguirre, one of three founders in 1918 of Uruguay's *El País* newspaper. Many of the participants who are riding today also carry flags that add to the sense of pageantry. At the head of the parade is the national flag, followed by Uruguay's two other official flags, the Flag of Artigas, and the Flag of the Thirty-Three Orientals, which bluntly reads "LIBERTY OR DEATH".⁴⁸³ Other flags represent the municipality of Sarandí del Yi, and local agricultural societies. One rider carries a flag with the MEVIR logo. The riders are not the only flag bearers, however.



Figure 25: MEVIR participants and community members ride on horseback on their way to the inauguration of homes in Capilla del Sauce (photo by author, 14 October 2022).

⁴⁸³ The Flag of Artigas represents the federalism that José Gervasio Artigas desired for the Río de la Plata region. The flag of the Argentine province of Entre Ríos, across the Uruguay River from Uruguay, is derived from the Flag of Artigas, except the upper and lower stripes are the light blue of the Argentina national flag instead of darker blue.

Horses or not, MEVIR inaugurations are an explicitly patriotic act. To be ranked at the top of one's class in Uruguayan public school makes you an *abanderado* (flag bearer). At public events, like a MEVIR inauguration, such students have the privilege, honor, and responsibility of bearing one of the three flags in an arrangement similar to an Olympic podium. The top student carries at the center the national flag, the second student, to the right, carries the Flag of Artigas and the third student, to the left, carries the Flag of the Thirty-Three Orientals. Each of these students are accompanied by two additional high-performing classmates, who are termed *escoltas* (escorts).

When the *abanderados* file up to the stage in Capilla, they line up by the order of protocol to the sound of their own anthem. The *Entrada de Banderas*, played over the loudspeakers, sounds surprisingly funereal for such a festive occasion.⁴⁸⁴ The mood enlivens once the *abanderados* are in place and then Uruguay's bellicose national anthem (the world's longest in duration) is played. The crowd patiently intones along, though at a far lower volume than before national soccer team matches. As the *abanderados* depart, the anthem of the flags is played again.

One *convenio* of which the current MEVIR administration is especially proud is with the *Servicio Oficial de Difusión, Representaciones y Espectáculos* (Official Service of Broadcasts, Performances, and Entertainment), or SODRE. This agreement brings dancers to perform folklore dances at inaugurations. Claudio Aguilar, SODRE's vice president says a few words to preface the performance (part of the reason Adán and Becerra needed to make sure the stage was in good shape), highlighting how important it is to take such a Montevideo-centric institution like SODRE into Uruguay profundo. Indeed, many, if not most of the people present today have

⁴⁸⁴ For a recording of the anthem of the three Uruguayan flags, see: Nacionalista En Lucha (2022).

never seen a live SODRE performance. There is time for the dancers, dressed in traditional costume (flowing colorful skirts for the women, khakis and boots for the men) to dance to several songs, including Jorge Nasser's "*Ruta 7*". The performers also dance the *pericón*, a staple dance of Uruguayan folklore.

Customary in the MEVIR inaugurations I attended, the participants are the first to speak. They are followed by various dignitaries, and then begins the handing over of the keys.

Paola, the maestra Cuello and I visited, talks about housing in an ur-sense, referring to the needs of "our oldest ancestors". She urges people without adequate houses to fight for MEVIR, citing in her delivery a poem from the Argentine author Leopoldo Lugones. Viviana, speaking on behalf of the nucleus participants reminisces about the work and sacrifice she and her companions made. She acknowledges how Becerra showed good leadership by congratulating the participants at important milestone moments throughout the obra, and she thanks Cuello for her good sense of humor.

Juan Pablo Delgado shows his penchant for facts by announcing with a grin that the average age of participants in this plan is 31 (my own age, coincidentally, at the time). He is also delighted how there are lots of peones rurales participating in this plan. "We are returning to the origins of MEVIR in Gallinal's backyard" he exclaims. Delgado shares a phrase with the audience that a participant said to him, "having a house does not mean you are rich, but not having a house is poverty."

Guillermo López, the Intendente of Florida and a hydrological engineer by training, has a political stake in the game. He tells the audience how the intendencia is working on paving streets and other details, in order to improve the status of this neighborhood. "This is Capilla.

This is Florida. This is Uruguay,” he proclaims. He thanks the horse riders. “MEVIR has recuperated the original sense of MEVIR. Closeness (*cercanía*), and innovation.”

Tabaré Hackenbruch, the deputy minister of housing, and son of a longtime intendente of Canelones, speaks on behalf of the MVOT. He highlights how MEVIR’s interinstitutional work stands out in Uruguay and he tells the audience the story of Gallinal’s agreement with Gestido, arguing that this cross-party and cross-regime spirit sustains the organization to this day. “These are your tax resources,” he says, “we need to use them as efficiently as possible.”

Carina Folle adds the detail that Gabriel “El Gaucho”’s family is gifting a plant to each participant family to have in their home.



Figure 26: MEVIR president Juan Pablo Delgado (gray suit) congratulates a family in Capilla del Sauce on receiving the keys to their MEVIR home (photo by author, 14 October 2022).

Once the speeches conclude, it is time for each family to receive their keys. After Folle runs down the list of MEVIR board members and other dignitaries who will hand out keys, the remaining handers-out are left up to Folle's discretion, and she draws on those who happen to still be around.

After I am asked to hand over a key, I am whisked away by Becerra. He is with a participant, Justo, who would like me to mount one of his horses. I enjoy the remainder of the ceremony on horseback. When all the keys are handed over, a group of *payadores* intone lyrics they have conjured up about MEVIR.⁴⁸⁵

As the keys and energy efficiency kits are handed out, Folle announces the names of the participants, many of whom break down in tears of joy. Cuello is thrilled to be given a microphone and adds her director's cut commentary. She congratulates a *terreno propio* participant who was chosen by *oficiales* to work on the nucleus, thanks to his construction prowess. When Cuello mentions how Tormenta and Karina put in hours above and beyond the average, there is a loud applause from the other participants. "*Que hinchada que tiene* (What a fan club they have!)" Cuello responds. When another participant receives his keys, Cuello ties the occasion to MEVIR's history and continuity in Capilla, noting how this person's father did a house in Capilla's first plan. When Ibis's family receive their key, Cuello announces how they are from the "very rural" Chilcas y Chingolas and will now have their house. When commending the number of hours the group as a whole contributed, she even jokes that babies in the womb did hours.

The party in the club is a more sanguine affair than after the drawing, and not just because of the sun. Various cuts of beef and sausage accompany the other finger foods, people

⁴⁸⁵ A *payada* is a type of improvised sung verse that is a part of gaucho folk tradition.

mill about more, and most importantly, a cumbia trio from Cerro Colorado is playing on stage. As Cuello makes the rounds congratulating everyone, kissing babies with a genuineness that would make a politician envious, various people dance. These include participants, oficiales, and their loved ones, including Miguel Ojeda and his wife.



Figure 27: No MEVIR inauguration is complete without a themed cake (photo by author, 14 October 2022).

6 December 2022

A couple of months after the inauguration, I accompany Cuello and Becerra for a follow up trip to Capilla. There are other days when these two have visited since the inauguration,

mainly to continue working on terreno propio homes, but today is an assembly with the nucleus group, and thus a better day for me to make the trek.

As there is slightly less urgency to get to the obra today, we stop in Paso de la Cadena, not just to get gas, but to check out the work of late MEVIR architect Enrique Trucco. Trucco, as his peers reminisce, took more creative license than most MEVIR architects. This is especially evident in Paso de la Cadena, where he designed a salón comunal for a plan completed in 2002. The meeting hall is in two parts, connected by a covered brick archway whose various textures and shades of reds, grays, and browns gleam in this morning's late spring sun. Outside there is a plaque with a quotation of Alberto Gallinal from 1986, affirming MEVIR as a national-scale and nation building project:

*“I call upon you for the future and
to make better,
more beautiful,
and more just the future
of the
national reality...”*

Inside is a quote of José María Mieres Muró from 2002. This also speaks to how MEVIR sees itself grounded in a place-based reality,

*“Each house a home,
each home a family
that the blessing of
solidarity work has
helped to make a reality.”*

At the Club Social in Capilla it is an incongruous sight to see the majority of participants wearing t-shirts, shorts, and sandals. Today's warm weather is of course the main culprit, but I have grown accustomed to seeing participants in the long pants and work boots required of the obra.

Cuello has brought a few more boxes of books given by Broli. The main act of the assembly today is to distribute the books between the families. Cuello and I have organized the books by theme and spread them out across several tables so that the choices are easier. We have made sure there are plenty of children's books available. We allow each family three rounds in which to come up and select a book. The remaining books we donate to Capilla's high school later that day. Throughout the assembly, Cuello hands out photographs taken throughout the obra that she had printed. Becerra makes himself available on the stage area for technical questions from participants who are just getting used to their homes. He brings a printed copy of a floor plan to help guide them. Participants have also brought more gifts, including personalized notebooks for Becerra and Cuello, and a MEVIR flag for me.

Later in the afternoon, we visit the nucleus, or better, the now completed "obra." Grass is slowly growing, but there is still more brown than green. Plants which the participants have brought, in addition to the espumillas, add life to the neighborhood. Most families have already erected DirectTV antennas on their homes. We visit José, the veteran of the group, where he lives with his two middle-school aged grandsons. His house is unmistakable, and he has taken an important step in making it his home. At the front entrance, he has proudly hoisted the flag of his beloved Peñarol.

Chapter Five

Beyond the Obra: Keeping Tabs on a Place

MEVIR's work does not end with the inauguration of an obra and a follow-up assembly with participants. There are multiple ways in which the institution continues to engage with the places where it has built. MEVIR shifts its role from builder to landlord for the next twenty some years, until families who have fulfilled all their rent payments become owners. In addition to collecting rents and attending to technical queries, MEVIR sustains contact with participants through reassigning homes that have been vacated. This is an activity that draws on MEVIR's know-how from the pre-obra stage (see Chapter Three). The institution also sustains contact while preparing families to sign the deeds they need to become property owners. My ethnographic observation of these activities provides a window into how having a MEVIR home has impacted the lives of families and how the outcome of a MEVIR plan can depend on regional differences and other locational factors. Besides its role as landlord, MEVIR also works "beyond" the obra, in the forms this is traditionally conceived, when various state bodies call upon its reputation and expertise in times of need such as disaster relief. MEVIR's work beyond the obra also extends to the institution's symbolic and ceremonial functions, where it makes itself visible to the public at events not tied to a specific construction project.

MEVIR's "post-obra" and "non-obra" efforts help to cement the mutual trust and respect between service provider and recipient. In addition to official interactions between MEVIR employees, participants, and allies (such as supportive politicians), this is evident in the welcome nature of incidental encounters across the country between people that MEVIR has brought together. Underpinning this constructive relationship between a parastatal institution and rural

communities is the high degree of likelihood that MEVIR will return to any given town in order to build new obras. By drawing from my ethnographic field notes, I argue in this chapter that keeping tabs on places is the guiding ethos of MEVIR's work after and beyond construction.⁴⁸⁶

CONTINUED CONTACT BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS AND MEVIR

MEVIR makes a reasonably clear demarcation between “obra” and “post-obra”. The technical team, such as Federico Becerra and Silvia Cuello in Capilla del Sauce, returns to the site a few times in the subsequent months to tie up loose ends and to conduct a few follow-up meetings. After the few follow-up assemblies, any interaction between a MEVIR technician and the participants on the plan they led lies outside their job duties. Meanwhile, technicians focus most of their *jornadas* on other obras that MEVIR has assigned them to lead.⁴⁸⁷ This transition bears some resemblance with the relationship between teachers and their former students.

Among MEVIR technicians who have broached this topic in my presence, there is a prevailing sentiment of lasting goodwill, even if the ties are weakened by distance, infrequency of interaction, and the goal of social workers to cultivate independence among participants.⁴⁸⁸

Magela Vicentino, as mentioned in the last chapter, speaks about friendship between social workers (and also architects, by extension) and participants as the result of mutual respect accrued through the fulfillment of expectations on the obra. Echoing Ramón Castro's reflection

⁴⁸⁶ My subtitle and use of the idea of “keeping tabs” on a place is a nod to James “Pete” Shortridge (1996).

⁴⁸⁷ Most likely, the technicians will be paired with a different colleague for their next obra, though the likelihood for non-Montevideo based technicians of leading a team with the same colleagues is higher. The fact that MEVIR technicians will end up forming a technical team alongside many different colleagues over their tenure supports the personal and knowledge networks that sustain and propel the institution. Moreover, it reinforces the spread and value of geographic knowledge gleaned from across the country, especially when a younger technician is paired with an older one.

⁴⁸⁸ Elida Biassini, the wife of Ramón Castro, expresses gratitude that social media have allowed her to keep in touch with families from a plan Castro did in the late-1990s in the extremely remote *paraje* of Los Feos, Tacuarembó (personal communication, 25 March 2024).

that you want participants to hug you when you visit is Becerra’s motivational speech that he wanted to come back to Capilla with “good memories” and his “chest puffed out”. Channeling Margarita Lasarte’s pleasure at running into a participant while we wait at the bus shelter in Peralta is Beatriz Sampayo’s comment that one of the most satisfying things about MEVIR is the joy of going back to a plan you worked on and seeing how people’s lives have improved.⁴⁸⁹ Diego Duarte, the Treinta y Tres based social worker, says that “my job as a[n obra] social worker is complete if participants never call me again except to wish me a happy birthday. I do everything I can to make them be self-sufficient.”⁴⁹⁰ Sometimes, the admiration of participants towards social workers is evident in actions with a deeper meaning than birthday greetings. The Montevideo-based social worker Marcela Durán tells the story of a return visit to Juanicó many years after completing a plan. A participant with whom she had long lost touch introduced Durán to her daughter, named Marcela in homage.⁴⁹¹

The MEVIR employees in contact with its tenants are not limited to the field technicians who did their plan. The labor of post-obra is spread across multiple sectors of the office. When participants call MEVIR, the two general receptionists can direct them any number of ways. If you have a question about how to make sure your child inherits your home, talk to the legal section.⁴⁹² You are seeking to adjust your *cuota* (monthly rent payment)? Then ask to be

⁴⁸⁹ Interview with Beatriz Sampayo, 15 July 2022.

⁴⁹⁰ Interview with Diego Duarte, 23 June 2022.

⁴⁹¹ Field notes, 27 October 2022.

⁴⁹² Maria Eugenia Viré, the organization’s legal director and a native of Dolores, points out an additional benefit of MEVIR homes. They are an especially secure form of land tenure compared to other housing options. The reason for this lies in the legal strength of the contracts (field notes, 30 May 2022). Carmen Pérez, a participant on a plan in Independencia, Florida in the mid 1970s, explains to me another legal benefit of MEVIR homes. Unlike housing of the BPS, Uruguay’s social security bank, MEVIR homes (before deed signing) can be passed along to an owner’s children. The BPS homes must be occupied by people qualifying under this organization’s own rules (interview, 15 June 2022). This difference in social policies illustrates how MEVIR is both a nation and a family-building project.

connected to the accounting department. There is an issue with leaky pipes? You might then inquire with obras on the second floor, from where the office-based architects work.⁴⁹³

Even MEVIR's communication and IT divisions have made an important foray into participant-institution connection. The current MEVIR administration has launched a mobile app designed to streamline queries. After logging in with their *cédula* (state ID), tenants can choose from a menu of options. They can make complaints (*denuncias*), access online receipts, advance bureaucratic procedures (including making payments), view tax information, send messages, read news and *llamados*, sign up (this applies not to tenants, but to potential participants), and even look at a map of where MEVIR has intervened "*en el territorio*". The page for the app on GooglePlay indicates that it has received more than 10,000 downloads. MEVIR would do well to monitor the breadth and depth of tenant engagement with the app.⁴⁹⁴

Rent payments are the most common reason tenants interact with MEVIR. The amount of subsidy families must pay back monthly to MEVIR, as discussed in previous chapters, differs for each family. This is calculated by MEVIR's office-based social workers with technical assistance on some matters by agronomists. What holds true for all is that cuotas are not allowed to exceed fifteen percent of household income.⁴⁹⁵ Crucially, payments do not accrue interest. This is something that a lot of people do not realize, agronomist Mike Brennan hastens to add.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹³ Hugo Javiel tells me that when families build additional structures on their plot of land before signing deeds, they need to obtain approval for this from their *intendencia* rather than from MEVIR (interview, 8 June 2022).

⁴⁹⁴ The successful penetration of broadband across Uruguay's interior portends well for the viability of the MEVIR app.

⁴⁹⁵ Preparing for how to deal with inflation, MEVIR sets cuotas in terms of *Unidades Reajustables* (URs), a unit of measurement whose value is periodically adjusted. It is based on Uruguay's Average Wage Index, quantifying the variations over the previous twelve months. Since the end of the early 2000s regional economic crisis, which saw inflation rise to nearly twenty percent in 2003, Uruguay's annual inflation rate has hovered between four and ten percent.

⁴⁹⁶ Brennan makes the cogent observation that *peones* (rural wage laborers) have a different economic mentality than small family producers who are more entrepreneurial. Peones are much less likely to be acquainted with interest as a financial concept, says Brennan (interview, 15 July 2022).

Brennan argues that “MEVIR is very benign” as a landlord. When a participant agrees to a certain monthly payment, they know that they will never have to pay more than that amount, even if their income goes up. MEVIR has little institutional will to make families pay more as their situations improve.⁴⁹⁷

Several employees in MEVIR’s accounting sector deal specifically with the payment of cuotas. The current MEVIR administration has delegated two of these employees along with some of the legal team to work directly on recouping late payments. In the office dedicated to cuotas is a shelf for receipts and other documents, containing cubby holes. These are organized in alphabetical order by department. In some cases, the width of each slot has been altered based on the importance of each department. For example, Canelones is the widest and Flores the narrowest. A paper taped to the side of the shelf lists the plans for which deeds will be signed along the calendar year. The team members for the cuotas deal with numbers and they are often on the phones, walking participants through the procedures of paying, or explaining their latest balance to them.⁴⁹⁸

Much of this work was historically outsourced to people in the towns themselves. Many towns have a *recaudador* (money collector), often from within the group of participants, who goes door-to-door monthly to gather payments and send them to MEVIR. In an earlier MEVIR, these *recaudadores* were often people closest to Gallinal’s circle of trust. Starting with the arrival of the Frente Amplio in 2005, MEVIR began to phase them out, although many were

⁴⁹⁷ There is the additional question of the impact of a MEVIR plan on real estate values in a town.

⁴⁹⁸ More than once, when I stopped by the cuotas office, a participant had come there in person with their query. These interactions illustrate the bureaucratic function of Montevideo in the pastoral city-state. For many *canarios*, Montevideo is the city of *trámities*. While you are in town, there is a logic to running this kind of errand, even if in-person interaction is not strictly speaking necessary. On another occasion, while taking the elevator up to human resources on the seventh floor, I was joined by a man in a boina who was seeking the right person to inform him about what changes he could make to his roof.

grandfathered into the system.⁴⁹⁹ Ricardo Nopitsch gives the example of the recaudador in Sarandí del Yi, who was a participant in the town's first nucleus in the early 1980s and recently earned her social work degree.

Mike Brennan points to pluses and minuses with the gradual loss of recaudadores and the replacement of this form of labor by MEVIR social workers, usually working from a distance.⁵⁰⁰ The downside, he says, is that the process becomes more impersonal.⁵⁰¹ Recaudadores also serve as an important nexus connecting the institution with participants. A positive aspect of this shift is that recaudadores, according to Brennan, did not always do a good job, however. Adding that recaudadores are amateurs, he uses the analogy of a church offering plate, where some of the cash given by parishioners may “disappear” before being deposited into a parish's accounts. Location, Brennan notes, can also impede the effectiveness of recaudadores for MEVIR. There have been instances where the homes are too far away from a bank, so the recaudador gives the money to anyone in town who happens to be headed to the departmental capital, in an effort to save themselves the cost of a bus ticket or gas.

Regardless of how the money gets into MEVIR's hands, delay in payment is a chronic issue, one dating back to the SWOT analysis made by Ares and Pini in 1987. As Diego Duarte puts it to me, default is MEVIR's main shortcoming. “How”, he asks, “is it possible that a landlord with over thirty thousand homes only has two people dedicated to debt collection?”⁵⁰² Duarte is passionate about the importance of post-obra, going so far as to claim that the need for social workers to prepare participants for life after moving into their homes is more important

⁴⁹⁹ Interview with Ricardo Nopitsch, 10 June 2022.

⁵⁰⁰ Interview with Mike Brennan, 15 July 2022.

⁵⁰¹ The fact that the social worker doing the collection of late payments is probably not the same one who worked on the plan, and thus built a relationship with participants, compounds the impersonal nature of the process.

⁵⁰² Interview with Diego Duarte, 23 June 2022.

than getting the obra completed. Given the political incentives to build homes, he notes that MEVIR does not fully recognize this, however. During the obra, Duarte keeps an Excel sheet of everything he needs to cover every two weeks with the participants. He stresses that forming a proactive neighborhood commission to deal with post-obra matters on site is crucial. Making sure this is in place by the end of the obra is one of his highest priorities.

When twenty to thirty percent of MEVIR's funds comes from rent payments, *morosidad* (impunctuality in payments) can have a significant impact on the organization's bottom line.⁵⁰³ Several factors combine to compound the entrenchment of *morosidad* as a limitation on MEVIR's progress.

MEVIR was conceived to plan and build homes, not to collect debt. What happens after participants moved in, was, as Ricardo Nopitsch remarks, a missing piece in the original vision of the organization, albeit a stage not left out on purpose.⁵⁰⁴ As a corollary to this, and paraphrasing the vision of multiple informants, social workers, who place their working emphasis on empathy, do not make the best debt collectors.

The post-obra, as noted above, is not a specific sector of MEVIR, but it is scattered rather over multiple sectors. Granted, the pre-obra and obra stages also involve employees working in different parts of the office. But the major difference is that the post-obra stage is about the more mundane, less urgent, and less politically salient job of maintenance, rather than carrying out a project to completion (except for the final months leading up to deed signing). As such, there is less cross-sector coordination and accumulated institutional consensus that lays the groundwork for best practices.

⁵⁰³ Tenants in arrears are not MEVIR's only debtor. Alejandro Sandobal says that the OSE is MEVIR's largest debtor (interview, 1 June 2022).

⁵⁰⁴ Interview with Ricardo Nopitsch, 10 June 2022. He recalls that in the late 1980s, social workers began claiming the need for more post-obra work, citing the rather large plan in Quebracho, Paysandú as a case in point.

The habits of the participants themselves also affect debt collection. As Silvia Cuello assures me, referring to the Uruguayan custom of being content doing the bare minimum, “Uruguayans *love* cuotas” (emphasis hers), preferring small installments to paying off debts in larger chunks.⁵⁰⁵ A few participants, she notes, will pay off their debts quicker, if they receive an inheritance, for example. But most do not think of paying more than their fixed monthly amounts, even where they have the means to do this. Ricardo Nopitsch adds that default is not always a result of participants falling on hard times. He remembers a social worker going to visit a debtor family in San Luís del Medio, Rocha, whose home was full of sophisticated appliances.⁵⁰⁶ Household financial literacy is a skill that MEVIR could stress even more in assemblies during the obra.

While Cuello is aware of these risk averse habits, she sees another dimension to participants’ ability to make rent payments. “*La gente mejora*” (people improve), she beams. In the case of families who had previously rented on the open market at much higher rates than MEVIR, there is the latitude to make life improvements. Betterment is one of MEVIR’s core values at the obra stage. But this has not driven a campaign to promote more expedient rent payments, especially for families for whom MEVIR has facilitated significant financial gains.

The now-retired Beatriz Sampayo explains how she did her best to incentivize her participants to pay their cuotas, telling them to not forget where they were before in life and reminding them that they are not owners for twenty years. They are renters with the *possibility* (a word she stresses), however, to become owners if they are responsible.⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁵ Interview with Silvia Cuello, 13 June 2022.

⁵⁰⁶ Interview with Ricardo Nopitsch, 10 June 2022.

⁵⁰⁷ Interview with Beatriz Sampayo, 15 July 2022.

Carmen Pérez, a participant in Independencia, Florida in the mid 1970s, remembers that during assemblies, the technical team was insistent about paying on time. The stated reason: patriotism. “*Ayudar a tu compatriota trasiende el pueblo*”, Pérez recalls MEVIR technicians saying. Paraphrasing and elaborating on this, this sentiment of patriotic thought focused around the idea that helping your fellow Uruguayans who need MEVIR homes in other parts of the country transcends your life in your small town.⁵⁰⁸

If the pre-obra and the obra bring about an urbanization of Uruguay profundo, then MEVIR’s post-obra, through rent payments, brings about a financialization. Debt, apart from settling up at the end of the month with a local *almacenero* (storekeeper), has been an alien concept to many rural Uruguayans. Ana María Henderson, of the local commission in Cuchilla del Guaviyú, Salto, describes the palpable fear of many locals who did not want debt. These people were accustomed to the relative certainty of a life with few costs, living either on land they had always had or that their boss let them live on in exchange for work. Small vegetable gardens and livestock at arm’s length kept such rural residents fed.⁵⁰⁹

The extent to which MEVIR pursues rent payments is an ideological matter. This is rooted in debates about groups or categories of deserving and undeserving poor and the extent to which MEVIR should be subsidized by the state. Not surprisingly, each MEVIR administration has approached this matter differently. The current MEVIR administration has doubled down on showing its interest in tenants paying their share and on time. The creation of the MEVIR app is not their only tool. As recently as March 2024, MEVIR activated direct deposit via the BROU as a valid method of paying rent, something long advocated from various quarters. A post on the MEVIR Instagram account advertises that “being up to date [on your payments] is mutual aid”

⁵⁰⁸ Interview with Carmen Pérez, 15 June 2022.

⁵⁰⁹ Interview with Ana María Henderson, 12 November 2022.

and includes a promotion that families who make twelve consecutive on-time payments will find their thirteenth payment waived.⁵¹⁰

THE REASSIGNMENT OF VACATED HOMES

Not all families remain in their MEVIR home until they can become owners. As with collecting rent, MEVIR has a stake in the matter not just financially, but also to do good on its social commitment. Both *morosidad* and *viviendas vacias* (vacated homes) are examples of MEVIR not going to plan. The reasons behind house abandonment and rent arrears are legion. In some cases, vacated homes are welcome though. An example of these would be when somebody lands a better job in a different place.⁵¹¹ Not surprisingly, at the departmental scale, wealthier departments have lower rates of home reassignment.⁵¹²

Within MEVIR, as discussed in Chapter Three, there is a general understanding of where *not* to build. This knowledge is based on in-house studies of housing demand. Nonetheless, housing needs in a locality today are not necessarily the same as they will be there a decade hence. MEVIR, as Mike Brennan points out, does not build for people based on their employment.⁵¹³ As Ricardo Nopitsch adds, nor has it always accounted for the availability of services in the localities where it builds. He gives the examples of Piedra Sola (pop. 210) on the border of Tacuarembó and Paysandú, and Feliciano (pop. 77) in Durazno as “bad locations”.

⁵¹⁰ MEVIR (@meviroficial), Instagram post, March 9, 2024.

⁵¹¹ The social worker Florencia Basanta notes that if a tenant is transferred to a different town for work, they can ask MEVIR that their house not be reassigned, should they wish to maintain a stake in their pueblo. Basanta also comments that if tenants sublet to people from outside their families, they have to pay a higher cuota (field notes, 29 August 2022). The idea is that MEVIR, until deed signing, is engaged in social-interest housing, not in a business.

⁵¹² As of June 2022, Soriano (13 out of 1,249), San José (15 out of 1,412), and Colonia (23 out of 1,239), have the lowest percentages of nucleated homes that have been reassigned. Artigas (70 out of 1,284), Cerro Largo (69 out of 1,330), Paysandú (136 out of 2,652), and Salto (68 out of 1,868) have the highest. Source: MEVIR – Evaluación y Monitoreo 2022.

⁵¹³ Interview with Mike Brennan, 15 July 2022.

These are places prone to abandonment, where MEVIR built motivated from the desire to build more homes more than thinking about how viable those homes would be.⁵¹⁴

In some cases, *viviendas vacias* are the result of *morosidad*, as MEVIR evicts a family following egregious negligence of payments. From my understanding, this is a subjective matter and one up to the discretion of MEVIR. In addition, it often happens long after the six missed payments that in theory will elicit a cessation order. As a social policy to benefit disadvantaged families, MEVIR shows an implicit leniency in how it approaches the post-obra. Unlike with debt collection, however, MEVIR has a more systematic procedure of *jornadas* where social workers travel to the town to reassign homes. These jornadas are also a good way of gauging current housing demand and reporting this back to colleagues.

Isla Patrulla, Treinta y Tres, 22 June 2022

At a quarter to four in the afternoon on the shortest day of the year, I meet Silvia Cuello at Tres Cruces, Montevideo's central bus station, and we catch a bus the four hours to Treinta y Tres. This is to become our base for the next two days for a reconnaissance mission and for interviews linked with the reassignment of homes in two towns in Treinta y Tres Department, Isla Patrulla (pop. 230), and Mendizábal (pop. 82), better known as El Oro. When we arrive in Treinta y Tres, Cuello picks up the rental car we will be using, and we share a dinner of *brasero* (a heap of assorted grilled meats) with retired MEVIR social worker Alicia Barrios. The venue is one of the few restaurants open in the city center on a winter Tuesday, a *parrillada* simply named "La Parrilla" (The Grill).⁵¹⁵

⁵¹⁴ Interview with Ricardo Nopitsch, 10 June 2022.

⁵¹⁵ Treinta y Tres (pop. 25,477) is one of the smallest departmental capitals. Its center has only one plaza, making it more reminiscent of a pueblo than larger cities such as Salto and Paysandú. It has the peculiarity that the streets in the center are named after the Thirty-Three Orientals, the band of men led by Juan Antonio Lavalleja who fought in 1825 to extricate the territory that is now Uruguay away from the control of the Brazilian Empire. As a department, Treinta y Tres has a strong conservative and patriotic streak. It had the highest percentage of yes votes (68 percent) for the failed 1980 plebiscite that would have kept Uruguay's civil-military dictatorship in power. The department's

Early the next morning, Cuello and I take the road headed northwest. At halfway to Isla Patrulla, the pavement ceases after we have passed the ANCAP cement plant, and Cuello begins driving more slowly, including through a series of curves. The eastern half of Treinta y Tres is flat and dominated by rice fields, but the topography of the department's western portion is up-and-down by Uruguayan standards.⁵¹⁶ The entrance to Isla Patrulla is marked by a rusted sign, one containing the logo of the Department of Treinta y Tres and the words,

*BIENVENIDOS
PATRIA CHICA
ISLA PATRULLA*

The choice of words is not accidental. Isla Patrulla, a place, I would wager, to where more than ninety-five percent of Uruguayans have never been, is recognizable to the many fans of one of Uruguay's most famous folklore groups and undoubtedly the greatest artistic exponent of Treinta y Tres, Los Olimareños.⁵¹⁷ Their 1964 song "Isla Patrulla" uses the phrase "*patria chica*" in the refrain, describing the place as an "*arisco rincon tenaz*" (a tenacious gruff corner) and a "*mojón de la tradición*" (milestone of tradition). It further refers to the hilly and windy environment ("*las sierras son como madres y hasta el vientito es cantor*"), and contains an exhaustive list of locals to whom the *pueblo* was important.

I draw attention to this sign, not simply to add local color and a musical interlude into my narrative and to illustrate that semiotics reinforce the meaning of place. There is a broader point to make, one central to the objectives of this thesis. As a geographical term in the Hispanic

slogan is "*el pago más oriental*", or the most Oriental region. Oriental in this case is a double entendre, both a synonym for the Uruguayan nation and a reference to the department's easterly location within the country.

⁵¹⁶ A blank spot on the map of MEVIR's coverage is the rice zones of eastern Treinta y Tres. While MEVIR has plans in the larger towns of Vergara, Rincón, and La Charqueada, it does not have any interventions in the rice zones themselves. This is because the *pueblos arrozales* contain a de facto company housing system as a means of reproducing their labor force. For more on this, see: Cánepa González (2020).

⁵¹⁷ Olimareño is the demonym of Treinta y Tres, referring to the Olimar River, which runs through the departmental capital.

American world, “*patria chica*” has two meanings, seemingly contradictory ones, but both are deeply embedded in the aims of MEVIR. The literal translation of “*patria chica*” (small homeland) does not quite do idiomatic justice. The first meaning refers to a place that generates a sense of local identity that challenges and often supercedes loyalty to the state, or in the colonial period, to the Spanish Empire. *Patria chica* is a loose concept with respect to scale. In Uruguay, an individual’s *patria chica* may be their department as much as it is their *pueblo*. In the historical context of Latin American integration, the second meaning is the *patria chica* as the individual’s nation-state which stands in contrast to the “*patria grande*” or Latin America as a whole.⁵¹⁸

As Los Olimareños suggested six decades ago, Isla Patrulla is the quintessential *patria chica*, precisely the kind of place MEVIR seeks to promote. But MEVIR is also an explicitly national project, one not only to unite *paisanos* in a constellation of *patrias chicas* that increasingly resemble each other physically thanks to the organization’s intervention, but also as a policy that is part and parcel of a political tradition that distinguishes Uruguay from its neighbors elsewhere in the “*patria grande*”. Notably, while architects and public officials from Argentina, Brazil, and elsewhere have approached MEVIR on numerous occasions, the institution has never itself sought to expand its activities beyond the *paisito*.⁵¹⁹ Moreover, Gallinal conceived of MEVIR in a national scope, not an international one.

MEVIR understands the allure of the *patria chica* as a feeling that values immediacy over distance. MEVIR’s discourse of slowing rural-to-urban migration focuses on mitigating the expansion of informal settlements on the outskirts of Montevideo and departmental capitals. It

⁵¹⁸ Defending the “*patria chica*” of Uruguay within and against a much larger “*patria grande*” of Latin America is a recurring argument along the history of the Partido Nacional.

⁵¹⁹ Ricardo Nopitsch recalls multiple interchanges with foreign architects and officials who admired MEVIR, mainly from Argentina. These meetings and site visits were intellectually stimulating to him and his interlocutors, but they resulted neither in houses being built nor in the creation of lasting policy institutions (interview, 10 June 2022). The diminutive “*paisito*” (little country) is an affectionate term Uruguayans use to refer to their country.

also implies that by accessing a MEVIR home, *paisanos* from Isla Patrulla to Sequeira to Ombues de Lavalle will not only remain Uruguayan but will also strengthen their connection to both nation and state by not having to move abroad.⁵²⁰ MEVIR leverages people's sense of identity cleverly at both the local and national scales to generate demand for its services and funding for its operations.

Today is special for Cuello, as she was the social worker on the second plan in Isla Patrulla, inaugurated in 2010. We arrive early and call in at the home of Dinora (a retired *maestra*, who was on the local commission) and her husband, who introduces himself with a handshake and his last name instead of his first.⁵²¹ Accompanied by a grey cat, we chat around their fireplace for the next half hour, as Cuello and Dinora reminisce about various people from the pueblo that the social worker met during the obra. Dinora says that one of the homes that MEVIR is now reassigning has been vacated. The tenant received a domestic violence denunciation and was caught illegally procuring Brazilian license plates.⁵²² Cuello is not surprised, given that this man was not willing to put in his full hours during the obra. Dinora also explains how one of her two sons is the only person in the pueblo to work at the cement plant.⁵²³

Cuello's jornada, as she is tasked with gathering the information *in situ* that will allow MEVIR to decide which families can and will move into the vacated homes, involves various steps. The first of these is to deliver a speech on how the reassignment process works to

⁵²⁰ Efforts to stem emigration from rural Uruguay to Brazil and Argentina, where work was more abundant, was a focus of Uruguayan plans to promote agricultural colonization as early as 1882. See: Brandt (2019), p. 55

⁵²¹ As is the custom for MEVIR oficiales, it is common for *vecinos* in Uruguay profundo to be referred to by their last name. An *apellido* (surname) immediately situates a person in the local social ecosystem. In Montevideo, a surname matters little outside of wealthy circles.

⁵²² The illegal use of Brazilian automobiles is a common practice in northern Uruguay. See: *El País* (Uruguay) (2016a).

⁵²³ If I recall correctly, she was referring to the Cielo Azul cement plant, which is somewhat closer to Treinta y Tres than the ANCAP plant. Dinora's point nevertheless is that people from Isla Patrulla have not been partaking in the economic opportunities provided by the Cielo Azul plant since it opened the year prior.

interested parties, people who assemble in the town's salón comunal. Then, Cuello interviews those families who meet the requirements. Afterwards, she takes a reconnaissance trip around town to check out the state of the housing stock and the condition of the pueblo more broadly. Finally, she visits the homes of the families she interviewed to corroborate first-hand the information they gave to her.

We park outside of the salón comunal. It is named after Ruben Lena, the writer who provided Los Olimareños with many of their lyrics and who also once served as Isla Patrulla's school principal. In the morning mist, a black dog is chewing on the carcass of a bird in the overgrown grass nextdoor. We run inside as quickly as possible to avoid the nearly freezing temperatures, but to little avail. There is no heating in the building. As we still have a few minutes before the meeting starts, we step into a smaller room attached to the salón. Here we find heat in the form of a fireplace, around which two women in their early forties are standing. They are employees of the Intendencia of Treinta y Tres, tasked with taking care of the place. One of them, Rosana, was a participant in the 2010 plan and she and Cuello have kept in touch. Like Rosana, the other woman, Claudia is also wearing navy blue work clothes, ones with neon visibility stripes and bearing the logo of the intendencia. "*Estamos acá para calentar la cola*" (We're here to keep our tails warm) says Claudia. In a rural story by no means unique to Uruguay, Rosana explains that the old people are dying off and the young people are leaving because there is neither work nor housing.⁵²⁴ She shows us a group photo of ten of their

⁵²⁴ The nucleus that Cuello led in Isla Patrulla in 2010 had only 11 homes. Isla Patrulla has 38 nucleated homes overall, plus three more in planta urbana, and four in area rural. Rosana's comment that "there is no housing" for young people speaks to a limitation of MEVIR. Its intervention in any given locality is discrete, rather than continuous. It may build a lot of homes in one year, then refrain from building any more until a couple decades later. Thus, there is an element of luck for any given individual or family, as to whether they happen to qualify for a MEVIR home at the time the organization comes to town. Reassignment can be a consolation of sorts for these unlucky families. It is also a way for MEVIR to show that, even if it is not yet doing a new plan in your town, it has not forgotten about you.

contemporaries taken during their teenage years on a school trip. Claudia laments that almost all of them no longer live in “la Isla”, as locals invariably refer to their settlement.

Back in the salón, but now in the main part of the building, where its higher ceilings exacerbate even further the chill (there is not even a space heater in sight), Cuello sets up her documents on the table where she will do the interviews. Around half a dozen locals have showed up. Before Cuello can begin her speech, she fields a query from a woman wearing a pink stocking cap and a pink scarf. She tells Cuello that she is a rural producer but does not have her own land. Cuello explains that her predicament would be settled in a future MEVIR intervention but not today. When the word circulates that MEVIR is in town, *vecinos* use it as a chance to procure information from the institution, even if their own case is not relevant to the reason why MEVIR showed up today.

Given the infrequency of large gatherings in such small towns, the visit of a MEVIR technician offers a chance for some people to self-promote. An assembly of six people is a quorum by Isla Patrulla standards. Nelson Chiribao is aware of this, strutting with confidence into the meeting and to what is an all-female crowd. Chiribao is not here for MEVIR, but for politics. Wearing white sweatpants, red sneakers, a maroon puffy jacket, and a black boina, the late middle-aged Chiribao chats with me while Cuello is doing the interviews, from which I choose to keep my distance. He explains that he is gathering signatures for a petition to have the road paved from the cement plant the additional 45 kilometers northward to Ruta 7, a stretch that includes Isla Patrulla. Chiribao is a retired military officer. His father and grandfather were both from Isla Patrulla, but he lived 33 years of his adult life in Treinta y Tres. He came to Isla Patrulla two years ago, seeking more peace. In addition to this infrastructure activism, he tells me with enthusiasm that he is *militando* (actively involved with) Cabildo Abierto and that “*el*

caudillo” is going to be in Treinta y Tres on Friday to give a talk at 5 PM.⁵²⁵ Whether or not anybody identifies with Chiribao’s political leanings, he has a point about paving the road, one that will better connect “la Isla” to the rest of the country, signaling to the government moreover that some two hundred people in an out-of-the-way place are as worthy of good transportation as bags of cement.

Chiribao is not here because he needs what MEVIR is offering today. But as someone resident in such a small town, he has his own MEVIR story. When he returned to Isla Patrulla the two years before, he sublet a MEVIR home (something he notes to me was illegal, but “people do it anyway”). MEVIR found out about this violation. They told him to leave but added that he did not need to be in a hurry. The original participant of that home, he tells me, was kicked out because he owes five-hundred dollars in cuotas. This is one of the homes that MEVIR is reassigning today.

As Chiribao makes the rounds, an older woman comes by to sign. She asks for my help to write her ID number in the right place. She starts talking about how she needs a bigger pension, telling me that she has issues with her retina and needs to get this fixed in Montevideo. This matter would explain her difficulty in putting pen to paper in the correct place. She was a MEVIR participant and wants to ask Cuello about how to organize her payments.

I take a break from writing my field notes, in order to return to the room next door, so that I can warm up. Rosana and Claudia are drinking mate by the fireplace. The room serves as a library and computer center. On the wall is a flyer for Plan Ibirapitá, a state program that

⁵²⁵ Cabildo Abierto is a new populist political party that has drawn much of its support from the military, and whose votes, especially in the periphery of Montevideo and in Rivera helped tip the balance of Uruguay’s last election away from the Frente Amplio and towards the coalition government. “El caudillo” refers to the party’s leader, Guido Manini Ríos, a retired military general. Cabildo Abierto won 11.46 percent of the vote in the 2019 Uruguayan general election.

promotes tablet use for the elderly. On a table, books set in piles gather dust. The computers, which Claudia says were donated by the BROU, show no signs of use. In theory, Claudia and Rosana are there to take care of the place and help anyone who comes in. In practice they are “*cumpliendo el horario*”, passing the time until they get to leave at 1:00 PM. There are only so many times you can sweep clean the floor. Since the pandemic, nobody has come to access these services. But as Rosana tells me, the place was not exactly hopping before that. One of the prospective tenants who Cuello interviewed stops to say hello and ends up chatting for an hour. Time is clearly not of the essence in Isla Patrulla.

At one point Claudia starts talking about her college-aged daughter, who works as an assistant at a nearby big-game hunting estancia, Rincón de Los Matreros, whose name means something akin to Corner of the Untamed. Claudia mentions how it draws rich tourists from around the world (the nightly price is \$200 plus the trophy fees). I ask her more about the estancia, and she takes a book from the pile. It is a coffee table book in English of hunting lodges around the world and it contains a two-page spread on Rincón de los Matreros.⁵²⁶ The promotional text touts Uruguay’s “outstanding degree of security for visitors” and indicates that Rincón de Los Matreros will “take care of” your four-hour passage from Montevideo’s Carrasco International Airport to the all-inclusive lodge. The hunting tourists, salivating about the prospect of gunning down such fauna as axis deer, bighorn sheep, and water buffalo, pass through Isla Patrulla, but they do not stop there. Aside from a few service jobs, such as that in which

⁵²⁶ This luxury hunting lodge near Isla Patrulla and the caviar production in San Gregorio de Polanco are two examples of sites that connect remote places in Uruguay’s interior with the wider world. Moreover, they both are premised on the importation of exotic species for international consumption, ignoring almost entirely the domestic market. Were it not for MEVIR *jornadas*, I would not have heard about them. The contrast with the challenges of life in these towns needs little further accentuation.

Claudia's daughter works, any impact on the local economy is minimal, especially bearing in mind hunting's seasonal limitations.



Figure 28: MEVIR homes add a modicum of density to sparsely populated Isla Patrulla, Treinta y Tres Department (photo by author, 22 June 2022).

After Cuello finishes the interviews, we get in the car and drive around the pueblo. This takes longer than one might imagine. Isla Patrulla lies neatly on a rectangular grid, but its 230 people are spread across over 40 square blocks.⁵²⁷ Some of these blocks have no homes at all. At least the two MEVIR nuclei near the center have added some degree of density. There is a school, but no plaza; one almacén, but no establishment in which to sit down and eat or drink. The one church building we see has its curtains drawn and its walls seem badly in need of a new

⁵²⁷ The paucity of people despite the abundance of habitable space is symbolic of Uruguay as a whole.

coat of paint to cover the mold. Other than a cross on the roof, there is no other indication that this is a religious edifice. A bus shows up only once a day, the González line that goes from Treinta y Tres to Cerro Chato. Even for Uruguay profundo in the harshest hours of winter, there is a distinct lack of activity, economic or otherwise.

Plants and animals abound, and people live in closer proximity to these than to their fellow humans. Horses brush up against the front doors of homes. There are more chickens here than in any other town I have seen in Uruguay. This makes sense when there is but a single almacén and it is not even open much of the time. People need to be self-sufficient. As our tour makes clear, the homes, both in their original construction and in their current state, illustrate the inertia and the lack of prosperity in Isla Patrulla. Many houses have straw roofs. Even the MEVIR homes exhibit fewer personal touches than I have seen in nuclei elsewhere.

Three families that were eligible signed up for the chance to move into one of the two homes MEVIR is reassigning. All three of them live in dwellings MEVIR considers precarious. I accompany Cuello as she inspects them. In all three, the smell hits as we enter. It is a mix of wood smoke, mold, and animal fat used for cooking. Animals seem to be everywhere. In one home, a black rabbit is tied by leash to a post. The hallways are narrow and the rooms do not have doors. Windows are few and far between. Towels hang, serving as de facto curtains. Mattresses are flimsy and concave in their form, clearly not having been replaced in decades. Wood stoves are giant iron constructions that look a century old, and these are obviously not energy efficient. In one of the homes, the toilet is a hole in the ground. Aside from the scent, even at midday it is the darkness that stands out to me. There are no light fixtures, and only the occasional exposed fluorescent lightbulb. One of the homes has only minimal water leakage. In the other two, however, most of the house is susceptible to rain. One resident explains to us that

they huddle all the beds together in the middle of the room when it rains, in an effort to stay dry. Isla Patrulla may not have high housing demand in numbers. But the town illustrates the findings of MEVIR's research team that housing need in rural Uruguay is often more about the quality of housing than its availability. These families need better homes. And in this instance, for two of them, MEVIR will be able to meet their needs.

Cuello will not make the decision on which two of the three families will become MEVIR residents. That will be done at the office (in towns where the demand is much higher, MEVIR uses a lottery). But she has gathered information that will make the decision easier. All three families are cash poor, but one of them is asset rich. This family with assets owns livestock, whose value Cuello reckons runs well into five figures in dollars. A MEVIR agronomist will have to confirm the actual value later, she explains to me. Cuello, with her improvement ethos explains to me how she suggested to this applicant family they sell livestock so they can do things like repair the windows on their home.

On our way out of town, we are stopped at the police station by several police officers who ask for Cuello's driver's license and documentation of the ownership of the vehicle. They do not give us any reason why. Flustered, Cuello obliges. And after reviewing the documents, the policemen allow us to proceed. Police checkpoints, random or expected, are a frequent fact of travel around the developing world, but I had never encountered this in Uruguay. I ask Cuello if she had experience of it. She replies that she does not. Puzzled, we conclude based on everything else we have seen today, that these policemen are only acting this way because they are bored. Ushering us away from "la Isla", the local police are at least living up to the town's name, which translates to "patrol island."⁵²⁸

⁵²⁸ The origin of Isla Patrulla's name is unclear. "Isla" most likely refers to an island of trees. See: Malcuori (2010).

El Oro, Treinta y Tres, 23 June 2022

The next morning, we leave Treinta y Tres bright and early once again, this time destined for El Oro. This hamlet lies 30 kilometers northeast along Ruta 18, along the way to Río Branco and the Brazilian border. Compared to Isla Patrulla, the main difference in El Oro is that there is highway noise, with Ruta 18 only a few football-fields lengths from the pueblo. El Oro may be situated on one of the two quickest routes between Montevideo and Porto Alegre, but it could hardly be more forgotten.⁵²⁹ As with the song about Isla Patrulla, there is a story about El Oro that has helped put the town on the mental map of at least a handful of Uruguayans. When I mentioned that I had traveled to El Oro, several people asked me whether I knew of Dionisio Díaz, a real-life legend in Uruguayan folklore. In 1929, the day after his ninth birthday, Dionisio was attacked in a family feud, one in which his grandfather killed his mother. Dionisio managed, although he was severely wounded, to evacuate his baby sister, who was also wounded. He carried her in his arms while walking five kilometers from their campo to El Oro, where he was able to get help from the police station, and a ride to Treinta y Tres for medical attention. The sister survived, but Dionisio died en route.⁵³⁰

The police also play a role in today's jornada, an outing that offers a glimpse into how MEVIR tenants present themselves when the institution comes to town. As we arrive at the salón comunal, we are once again welcomed by a canine scene. This time, two dogs are copulating. The first *vecino* to greet us is another man who introduces himself by his last name only and tells us that he works at a nearby olive plantation. He has shown up early to check that he was not

⁵²⁹ The passenger bus service between Montevideo and Porto Alegre on EGA and TTL opts for the more coastal route along Ruta 9 that crosses the international border at Chuy.

⁵³⁰ Dionisio Díaz was the subject of one of Uruguay's first movies, a silent film in the early 1930s called *El pequeño heroe del Arroyo del Oro* (The Little Hero from El Oro Creek). More recently, his story has been documented by Uruguayan television programs and print journalists.

wasting his time in the event he did not meet the requisites. In the end it does not matter, Cuello tells him, because he did not have the proper documents in order. The only family who did meet the requirements also has its male head of household working for the olive plantation. This renders the jornada shorter, but Cuello still has to follow her professional obligations, which include visiting this family's home for due diligence, and making a reconnaissance of the town.⁵³¹

Cuello and I visit the home of the olive plantation worker who qualifies. It is a cement structure built in the backyard of his mother's MEVIR home. Other plots in the nucleus also contain such makeshift accessory dwellings. El Oro's two nuclei are adjacent to each other, and they together contain 26 MEVIR homes. The homes in the newer of the two nuclei are painted in a pale mint green. El Oro also has eight area rural homes.

Besides visiting the home of the applicant, we check out the status of other MEVIR homes that appear to be vacated. Abandonment, whether formally registered with MEVIR or not, has clearly been an issue in El Oro. Two homes belong to the police, the vecinos say, but there are no signs of occupancy. Another on the corner belongs to a *peón rural*, according to the next door neighbor, who lets us know that the peon had been "renting it out" for over a year. He has left the house in charge of his sister, who lives in another MEVIR home at the end of the block. We go to see if we can find out more from her. She is cordial with us, but Cuello immediately tells me afterwards that two and two do not add up. "*Hay uruguayos mentirosos*" (there are Uruguayans who lie), she says.

⁵³¹ The small number of families who showed up to the reassignment in El Oro contrasts significantly with the housing demand in the much larger nearby town of José Pedro Varela (pop. 5,118), where a few months later, dozens of families signed up for the reassignment of three MEVIR homes. The social worker Elena Romero tells me that she once went for a reassignment in Rincón de Pacheco, Artigas, where MEVIR had built a nucleus of a mere six homes. Three families signed up for the reassignment of a house, but none met the requirements. MEVIR resolved to award it to the family that was closest to meeting the requirements (field notes, 6 September 2022).

We stop at another MEVIR home, one which doubles as an almacén. The offerings are limited. A solitary red pepper suffices for the non-starch vegetable section. Lorena, the resident of this house, is second in command of the neighborhood commission. She gives us a report on their limited activities and on the neglected state of the salón comunal. This receives only rare use, except for once a year, when a local man, who does not have a MEVIR home, uses it to throw his own parties. Lorena also adds that several MEVIR oficiales have homes in El Oro.

Our last stop is at the home of Feijóo, a local referente mentioned to Cuello when she was preparing for this jornada.⁵³² As you open the door, the first thing visible is a wooden cabinet full of Johnnie Walker Red Label whisky bottles presumably bought at the duty-free shops in Río Branco. Feijóo's wife is there, as is their teenage son, who is smoking a cigarette by the fireplace. It is 11:30 in the morning. Why are none of them working, I wonder? Feijóo tries to persuade Cuello to pay him for having rented chairs and hired catering for the event this morning. Cuello sniffs out his intentions to make MEVIR reimburse him for a service that is outside the institution's duties, and for which (given what we saw in the salón) he likely paid far less than the amount he is quoting to us. She thus makes a move to leave, but Feijóo continues to spin his yarn. He tells us that the salón comunal used to be the police station and that the Ministry of the Interior made a convenio with MEVIR for the land of the salón. This is the reason, he says, why the two "police" houses we looked at in the older nucleus are uninhabited. MEVIR he explains, also made a convenio in turn with the intendencia for this to be in charge of maintenance for the salón comunal, a responsibility which they in turn passed off to the alcalde of Vergara (which is the next town on the way to Río Branco), who did not follow through. As we return to the car, Cuello calls his bluff. She tells me that this is not the first time she has

⁵³² I am using a pseudonym.

listened to someone who is trying to leverage MEVIR's presence in town for their personal gain. Feijóo, she surmises, is burnt out. He was the only one on the neighborhood commission putting in effort and he wants something in return.⁵³³ Back in Treinta y Tres, Alicia Barrios serves us a lunch of homemade chicken milanesas and mashed potatoes at her home. Cuello tells Barrios the day's stories. Since she was responsible for the plan in El Oro, Barrios confirms, in her surefire manner, the degree of mendacity to which we have been subjected.

PREPARATION FOR DEED SIGNING

Unlike the reassignment of homes, which is a response to chance events, preparing for the signing of deeds is a planned part of the MEVIR script. In theory, all families will have completed their rent payments in just over twenty years. In practice, many families take longer to pay up. When there is a critical mass of families with a balance of zero, MEVIR begins the process of deed signing.⁵³⁴ An institution that values ritual and is premised on bringing often-isolated people together in a social manner, MEVIR arranges for the deeds to be signed in a public ceremony.⁵³⁵ Such an event where families are recognized in front of their peers further incentivizes them to make their payments. A deed signing celebration is also in MEVIR's interests because it makes for good optics, especially when high percentages of the families are in a position to sign. Families unable to sign at the time of the ceremony can still do so later, albeit without the fanfare.

⁵³³ The fact that Cuello, unlike in Isla Patrulla, did not do the plan in El Oro is likely a factor behind the lies and omissions of MEVIR tenants to her as a technician who shows up post-obra. The trust and respect gained over the course of an obra would mitigate the likelihood of trying to cross a MEVIR employee.

⁵³⁴ It is not clear to me at exactly what point MEVIR decides to proceed with organizing the deed signings.

⁵³⁵ The senior MEVIR architect Renata Coppetti tells me that there is the rare case of a plan in La Cruz, Florida, where MEVIR never actually owned the land, and therefore could not subdivide the land into separate plots for which families could sign deeds (interview, 21 March 2022).

For deed signing (*escrituras*) to happen, MEVIR conducts a *jornada* a couple months ahead of time called a *promoción de escrituras*. A MEVIR social worker and MEVIR's supernumerary notary (see Chapter Three) of the department in question interview families to double check their payment balances and make sure all legal-notarial matters are in line. In addition to designating which individuals will become *titulares* (title holders/property owners), this review includes making sure that families have regularized any additional building on their property with their respective *intendencia*. Doing this allows the National Land Registry Office to subdivide the nucleus into plots and assign the plots numbers in its national database, since any nucleus under MEVIR ownership consisted of a single land parcel.⁵³⁶ The *promoción de escrituras* reinforces two values that MEVIR tries to inculcate from the pre-obra stage, punctuality and compliance with legal norms. The cooperation between a social worker and the notary also illustrates MEVIR's commitment to interdisciplinary teams.

I found the *promoción de escrituras* to be the richest ethnographic moment in the entire MEVIR process. I did not observe a *promoción* until over halfway through my 2022 fieldwork. If I could do one thing over, it would have been to attend more of these events, seeking to gather more data about how life outcomes of MEVIR residents differ between localities, and between other factors such as the size and age of plans.⁵³⁷ While I became more and more familiar with the participants in Capilla del Sauce over the course of the obra, my ethnographic interests were more about group formation, interaction with MEVIR technicians, and the progress of the obra. As far as personal and legal matters, I kept my distance for the purposes of confidentiality.⁵³⁸

⁵³⁶ Interview with Hugo Javiel, 8 June 2022.

⁵³⁷ Subsequent social scientific research on MEVIR would do well to focus on this particular stage and complement it with follow-up interviews of families and other local actors.

⁵³⁸ Inevitably, in conversations with Cuello and Becerra, details about the lives of participants would surface. While such details enriched my understanding and empathy, they are largely extraneous to my narrative.

Likewise, at the pre-obra stage of sign-up when potential participants are often presenting themselves in a more vulnerable state, I did not shadow social workers during interviews. In the *promoción*, however, listening to the interviews was a chance for me to learn about how people's lives have evolved since moving into their MEVIR homes. Promociones, by and large, deal with a different demographic. Families signing deeds are on average 20 to 25 years older than those families doing the work of an obra. These deed signers have thus more life experiences to offer. They are also self-selecting, in that they are the families who have succeeded in completing their payments. In my accounts of the two promociones I attended, I will avoid using the names and refrain from describing the sartorial or physical characteristics (however much of intrinsic interest they are) of individual participants.

González (San José), 29 August 2022

At daybreak, I meet the MEVIR office-based social worker Florencia Basanta at Tres Cruces and we hop aboard a CITA bus for the one-hour trip to San José, where Lucy Cabrera, the supernumerary notary for San José Department, will meet us and then drive us all to the event in González (pop. 222). Basanta has been with MEVIR since around 2012. A proud native of Colonia del Sacramento, she continues to summer there, noting that the beaches are better for bathing than most people make them out to be and that crowds are far thinner than in the traditional resorts of east.

After leaving Montevideo, Ruta 1 is full of billboards related to agriculture, advertising products like pesticides to an audience of farmers. In order to reach San José, you turn right onto the beginning of Ruta 3 at a place called Radial. Between the off-ramp and the highway is a large statue of José Battle y Ordóñez. *Blancos* like to joke that he is facing Montevideo, of course,

showing his back to the interior. The remaining stretch of highway is lined by smaller farms with houses that are larger, newer, and better-kept than in most of the country.

Lucy Cabrera is originally from Villa Rodríguez (pop. 2,604), a small town on the other side of San José. She maintains a notarial practice in Rodríguez, where she serves clients one day a week, although she has lived in San José for the last ten years. She studied in Montevideo, unsurprisingly, for her degree.⁵³⁹ Wearing a bright red wool sweater, she apologizes for the sullied state of her car, which is mostly a matter of stray yerba mate leaves. She tells Basanta and me about her eighteen-year-old son, who is finishing high school this year, and will likely start in the UdelaR's Engineering Faculty next year. Cabrera and a friend with a son the same age are looking to rent an apartment in Montevideo for the two to share.⁵⁴⁰ The handicaps of living in the interior transcend socioeconomic status.

The 20-kilometer drive to González on Rutas 11 and 23 parallels an abandoned railway, a track that soon thereafter bifurcates with one branch going to Colonia and the other to Mercedes. Along the drive, which includes a *letrero* (a welcome sign formed of giant free-standing letters) in front of a prison, Basanta and Cabrera brief me on what to expect in González, while sharing additional MEVIR stories. Cabrera has reviewed the files of all the families beforehand. In addition to the presence of the supernumerary notary working on behalf of MEVIR, each participant will need to have their own personal notary in order to sign the deed.⁵⁴¹ Cabrera comments that residents do not always understand which of the notaries is serving whose

⁵³⁹ Notarial studies form one of the degrees offered by the UdelaR's Faculty of Law.

⁵⁴⁰ University-sponsored (let alone subsidized) accommodations for students in Montevideo are scarce.

⁵⁴¹ Cabrera says that in the event participants do not have their own notary, MEVIR has a convenio with the *Asociación de Escribanos de Uruguay*, the national professional organization for notaries, to give work opportunities to recently graduated ones.

purposes. She also makes the observation that at *escrituras* and any *promoción de escrituras*, there is always a participant, usually an older one, “who knows everything” and runs the show.⁵⁴²

As was the case with the supernumerary notary for Florida I met at the selection lottery in Casupá, Cabrera does this as a labor of love.⁵⁴³ Her motivation is seeing families at deed signing ceremonies “happier than people who pay a few hundred thousand dollars for a house”.

González contains 49 nucleated homes in two plans, five *planta urbana* homes, and 41 homes resulting from area rural interventions. It is the families in the older of the two nuclei, inaugurated in 2001, who are coming today. Outside the *salón comunal*, there is a plaque thanking the Intendencia of San José “for the donation of the land helping participant families realize the dream of homeownership.” A paper about today’s event has been taped to the door and it is addressed to the families of González Plan I. It lists the families that have been called to the meeting, not by their surnames, but by their *hornero* numbers. The taped paper says that attendance is mandatory for at least one *titular*. And you must show two photocopies of ID for each titular, and, where this is possible, their rental contract with MEVIR. If you have a notary you trust, it indicates, come to the meeting with their name and telephone number so that MEVIR can contact them. The personal notaries are not summoned to today’s meeting but they will need to be present on signing day.

Immediately upon arriving, I witness a quintessential MEVIR interaction. Somebody has a question which is unrelated to today’s agenda, but takes advantage of a MEVIR employee’s presence in town to answer it. A participant from González’s second plan confidently approaches

⁵⁴² After attending two *promociones* and four *escrituras* in six different towns, I can confirm emphatically Cabrera’s observation about the “referente del plan”. Twenty years from now in Capilla del Sauce, this leader will probably be Isabel.

⁵⁴³ Working as a supernumerary notary for MEVIR is not a lucrative proposition on its own, but it is an avenue towards generating additional business.

Basanta telling her that she is not here for the event but wants to see if she can change the title from that of her husband to her own, since he died six years ago. Basanta takes down her ID and phone number.

Neighbors trickle in as Basanta sets up her PowerPoint and Cabrera arranges her documents on the table where participants will be interviewed. Lots of men are wearing flat caps in lieu of boinas, and plaid and flannel shirts are the common choices of layering for both men and women. The group sits in an orderly fashion in the rows of plastic chairs that fill the salón.

Wearing a beige overcoat, Basanta is professional, flexible, and patient in how she goes about her presentation explaining how deed signing works. As a younger staff member, she has a better knack for public speaking with a PowerPoint than some of the more senior MEVIR technicians. She introduces herself, Cabrera, and me. “We’ll be here for a few hours,” she warns. “So if you have a work or family situation that limits your time, let us know and you can take your turn earlier.” She then does a roll call. Everyone is here.

Cabrera explains that in some cases, the people whose names were on the original rental contracts will not be signing. A show of hands reveals that most people here are original title holders. Cabrera breathes a sigh of relief. “This makes it easier,” she happily announces. Basanta is understanding, assuring the families that “we recognize that each of you have your own situations.” She also clarifies the cost of the deed signing procedure, a matter many families were likely wondering about. She assures her audience that MEVIR makes deed signing free for all participants by covering the expense for each participant’s notary. She makes clear to them as well that they do not have to sign the deed with the rest of the group during the ceremony. Previewing the ceremony, she explains that at the signing there will be an act with dignitaries

and a fiesta afterwards. “You are the hosts. You organize it how you wish.” It will be up to the group to choose a representative to say a few words, especially about their memories of the obra.

Two of the slides in the presentation Basanta gives are worth reproducing here. The first summarizes the *raison d’être* of deed signing (bold in the original):

Goal:

Transfer property of the house to the participant families that fulfilled the duties established in the rental contracts for the MEVIR homes

The second asks,

“WHO CAN SIGN DEEDS?”

TITLE HOLDERS: *Those who signed the rental contract*

INHERITORS: *Must present death certificate and process the certificate of presumptive heirs. All heirs can sign or define who will be the title holder, in which case the other heirs must cede their share.*

Usufruct Reserve. You will link your children with MEVIR

SEPARATED COUPLES: *Must decide if both will sign or only one party, in which case you must process the transfer of rights, and in the case of having been married, the divorce sentence with division of assets. Your marital status matters.*

YOU GET TO DECIDE HOW YOU WANT TO SIGN THE DEED⁵⁴⁴

A participant raises his hand to share how his case is an exception. Basanta writes this down on a printed version of her spreadsheet. “Do you all have documentation with you?” she asks, eliciting murmurs in the crowd. “Special documents are needed”, she says, “if there is a change in the title holder.” Basanta clarifies two further questions. First, your main contact is with your notary, who will be in touch with Cabrera. Second, while MEVIR pays for your notary, families will incur costs related to regularizing physical changes in the property and changes to the title holder. Cabrera urges the families to not delay procuring a notary they trust, if they have not already done so, as this process takes a couple months.

⁵⁴⁴ Allowing families not just to become owners but also to choose *how* they take ownership is a significant example of yielding agency to participants.

The speech is over, and most of the participants leave the room to tend to other matters until their name is called. Many of them wait outside chatting under the bright morning sun that alleviates the chill.

For each family, Cabrera has a printed sheet with the relevant information. The main objective of this is to track whether the original participants are the same people who will be signing the deeds. If they are not the same, what life events, such things as deaths, transfers, and inheritances, have happened in the interim? She fills in the updated information for each family, along with the name of their trusted notary. Basanta follows along filling in details on her laptop. Cabrera asks the basic questions, addressing people with the more formal “*Usted.*” Basanta interjects when a matter requires more social worker acumen or knowledge of MEVIR’s policies. As I soon find out, the notarial process is easiest when it involves the same couple who were participants, and when they have the same marital status, live in the same house, and have their documents in order. Below, I recount as much relevant information as possible that I recorded for each family.

A married couple approach the table. Cabrera asks if they will sign. They agree to this. She asks if they are still living in the home. They confirm they are. She asks if they will continue to live there. They say, yes. “Ok. Simple,” Cabrera responds. “Do you have kids”, she then asks. “Two”, they confirm. “Which notary will you use?” “Andrea. She has experience with this in Raigón” (which is a nearby town). “Yes, I know her,” says Cabrera, a line she would repeat many times about her fellow notaries. Basanta confirms that their cuota balance is zero (on our way back to San José, Cabrera marveled at how unusual it was that all the families present today had paid off all their debts). The wife asks how long the signing ceremony will be. “A couple hours,” replies Cabrera. “Great. I’ll ask for time off.”

The next case is more complicated: an older man is a widower with four children, all of whom are living in the city of San José. Cabrera has to call one of his daughters for more information. The daughter asks her to talk with a different daughter. Cabrera responds that we cannot take too much time for this in the middle of the jornada while other families are waiting.

A disabled widow and her son and daughter-in-law. There are eight children involved. Six of these were recognized by the father. There is a seventh child and the main parties want this son also to receive his share of the inheritance, even though he has a different father. An eighth child is already dead. The son tells Cabrera, “*le voy a hablar en criollo*”, switching into colloquialisms to help cut through the legalese. Cabrera says that there will not be an issue to sign the deed later. “Great. We want simplicity,” the son answers. He has a MEVIR house in Rafael Perazza, another town in San José. Basanta clarifies that it does not matter if you own multiple MEVIR homes if one of them is by inheritance. Basanta asks him and his wife for their hornero number in Perazza. Basanta confirms that the mother is living alone in the house here.

A divorced mother and her son. The father is in a dementia home. Cabrera inquires about the state of his dementia. The son lives in Rodríguez and smiles because he knows Cabrera from there. He works at a Conaprole plant. Basanta tells them that it is their decision if they want to transfer the deed from mother to son now or later. It will be cheaper for the son to sign and take ownership now, while letting his mother still live there. Cabrera adds that their notary can help them make their decision. After they have left, Cabrera later clarifies to me that she chose her language carefully. The key point is that they need to wait for the father to die, but Cabrera, in order to be sensitive, has to tell them that indirectly.

A man now living in San José asks about how he can sell the home. “*Uno va mejorando*” (one improves their lot in life), he says, implying that he no longer needs a MEVIR home.

A woman who did not have some of the required documents comes back with more documents, but Cabrera and Basanta still need photocopies. There is a photocopier in town at the grade school that she can use.

An older gentleman brings an envelope full of cuota receipts. He has been married for 41 years. He lives in San José. With his wife's sickness ("*e' brava la cosa*", he says, a criollo expression akin to "it's tough"), they will probably stay in San José. The pandemic delayed an operation on the wife that led to lung problems. He sold a "*pedacito de campo*" (piece of land) to buy the house in San José. He lent his MEVIR house in González to a man without telling the organization, he tells us now. The man has been living there for three years, paying him 6,000 pesos (around \$150) per month.

A widower father and his son. Cabrera explains to the son to wait for his impending divorce to go through. Otherwise his current wife would be eligible to receive a part of his mother's share, which the son is due to inherit.

A couple with a tambo in Cerro San José, a slightly hillier area north of González. Their daughter-in-law lives in their MEVIR house, along with their grandson. The location of the house is helpful with the grandson because it is next to the grade school.

A couple whose son now lives in the MEVIR home with his children. The son works as a tractor driver. Meanwhile, the couple is living in Sarandí Grande and they do not know if they will go back to their MEVIR home in González when they retire.

A divorced couple wants to give the father's half of the house to their 18-year-old son, an only child. Basanta says if this were to happen, the son would then not be able to sign up for a new MEVIR home. This would come on account of his already owning half of another MEVIR home. The mother admits that her son is so young and will always be her sole heir, thus there is

little reason to hurry. Both of the parents want to make sure their son's future is not restricted to González, although of course he can make his life here if he wants to. They both think it possible that the son may want to be a MEVIR participant in another town sometime. What is currently clear is that the father wishes to leave his share either to his former wife or to their son. They will discuss all these matters with their notary.

A couple where the wife's mother moved into the MEVIR home ten years ago, following her retirement from a tambo, a place where these two now live and work. They also have a disabled adult son. Basanta reminds them there are things they can decide after the deed. Cabrera assures them that their son will not lose the roof over his head because he will inherit his own half of the property regardless of broader circumstances. It is important that you keep your name on it until you die, she recommends.

A divorced father and his son. The son lives in the MEVIR home and the father lives in San José. The son needs to leave the meeting soon, in order to go to work in a tambo. The father wants to give his part to the son. Both are already conscious that this would disinherit the son's sibling, because that sibling will likely participate in a housing cooperative in San José.

An older couple that lives in the home the days they are not working in the campo.

Another couple have a similar situation. They work at a tambo in Pavón (a rural area to the west of González named after the arroyo that flows through it). Their son has just started a relationship with a new girlfriend, about which they are beaming, and they do not know whether he will stay at the tambo or not.

A woman "*con un crío y nada más*" (with one kid and none more) works in the campo, and her husband works in San José. She has not yet found a notary. Cabrera urges her that now is

the time to designate one. She leaves with a smile, saying “*ese día no se trabaja*” (the day [of the signings] I’m not working).

A woman whose husband is a MEVIR oficial. They live in a MEVIR home in Florencio Sánchez (Colonia) that also has an hornero in the 16,000s (thus from around 2001).

Next is the brother of that oficial. He was also an oficial, for sixteen years, but came back to the area when his father retired and he now works in a tambo in Pavón. For the last four or five years, he has let the house out for free to the mother of another participant. But often comes by to maintain things at the house. He wants his children to have the option of living in it.

A woman tells us with amusement that she went to her notary to get everything in order for MEVIR and realized she needed first to get divorced.⁵⁴⁵

The de facto leader of the group is last to the table, but she is fine with bringing up the rear as she needs to close the salón anyway. She is a widow. When she dies, her three children will inherit. We talk more about the signing event. Basanta explains that MEVIR will inform her, as the “referente del plan”, about the timing of the event. This will depend on the availability of the authorities (most likely Juan Pablo Delgado, the Intendente of San José, and perhaps a high-ranking official in MVOT). She tells Basanta that she will start a WhatsApp group, which will be helpful, as many people live out of town. Cabrera compliments her how today’s participants have come especially organized.

When we close up the salón, yellow blooms of canola, a commodity currently fetching high prices, light up the scene across the highway. Basanta and Cabrera are buoyed by the morning’s proceedings, expressing what an affable and organized group this was. They cannot believe that only one family did not already have a notary lined up. They do, however, recognize

⁵⁴⁵ This is not the only time in Uruguay that I have heard of couples separating and not bothering to divorce formally.

that many families were probably lying by saying they “*prestar*” (lend) their homes rather than rent these out.

The participants (and their children), whom I met in González, seem better off than they would have been two decades prior.⁵⁴⁶ I found it noteworthy geographically that the participants who moved away are all still living in San José or other small towns nearby.⁵⁴⁷ Not once did someone mention decamping for Montevideo, by choice or by necessity.⁵⁴⁸

Cerro Chato (Paysandú), 6 September 2022

During our interview earlier in the year, Cristina Sienna, MEVIR’s planning director remarked that in the south, the average participant is poorer than the average person. In the north, however, participants are more often of the same socioeconomic status as the average person.⁵⁴⁹ After attending a *promoción de escrituras* in the south, I felt it necessary to witness one in the north as well. Fortunately, there was a *promoción* scheduled to take place the next week in Cerro Chato, Paysandú (pop. 333), another *pueblo tocayo* of the town where I first became acquainted with MEVIR.

I spend the night before in Paysandú and am picked up first thing in the morning by the social worker Elena Romero, who has come from her hometown of Dolores, and Cristina Mastracusa. The latter has served as MEVIR’s supernumerary notary for Paysandú Department

⁵⁴⁶ The extent to which this is a result of MEVIR as opposed to general economic growth calls for a much longer discussion.

⁵⁴⁷ A follow-up question would be to research the kind of housing and the quality of life these families have in the city of San José (pop. 36,747). They may be leaving the *pueblo*, but are they still fulfilling MEVIR’s mission of avoiding misery on the urban margins? Anecdotal, if judging by peoples’ appearance, speech patterns, and stories at the *promoción* in González, they are probably living reasonably well. This is of course self-selecting for those families who are able to sign deeds in the first place. San José, it should be noted, has fewer informal settlements than most cities in the interior.

⁵⁴⁸ This raises the broader question of what type of rural dweller moves to the big city. I hypothesize that in places like González, that are relatively prosperous and close to services (San José is twenty minutes away), the bulk of MEVIR participants constitute a band of the working lower-middle class. They can make a decent living in the vicinity and thus have fewer incentives to move to the big city, unless they are especially invested in improving their human capital. This relative stability is aided significantly by having a MEVIR home.

⁵⁴⁹ Interview with Cristina Sienna, 22 March 2022.

since being brought on board in the late 1990s with the rise of the Unidades Productivas. Going to a second promoción was valuable not just because I gained a chance to observe significant geographical differences but because Romero and Mastracusa picked up on different aspects of the signing process than Basanta and Cabrera.

Paysandú Department's Cerro Chato is larger than its namesake in Tacuarembó, which I had visited two months earlier (see Chapter Three), but a tenth of the population of the Cerro Chato I know best, the one along Ruta 7. This morning's journey from Paysandú takes approximately an hour. As we are heading to an agroforestry zone, we encounter a lot of trucks, many of which kindly use their turn signals to indicate whether it is safe to pass them. After turning north off Ruta 26, the second half hour is along rural roads that run through eucalyptus and citrus plantations. Around ten minutes before arrival, we pass through nearby Pueblo Gallinal, named for Alberto, a town consisting entirely of 211 nucleated MEVIR homes (along with no planta urbana and 5 area rural ones), organized in four contiguous plans, a veritable MEVIR metropolis.⁵⁵⁰ Cerro Chato has a comparatively paltry 69 nucleated homes (plus only two planta urbana and no area rural), although it was built, unlike Pueblo Gallinal, adjacent to a preexisting settlement carrying the same name. Heading north of the nucleus on a road for about a kilometer are scattered dwellings. These belong to family farms producing peanuts, squash, yams, and other crops.⁵⁵¹ Cerro Chato contains two nuclei built in quick succession in 1996 and 1997. Today, we are preparing the deeds for both plans. Cerro Chato may be isolated, but at least it has two daily buses to Paysandú. Romero compares this to even more remote places, such as Cerros de Vera in Salto. There, one bus each week connecting the paraje to Salto arrives on a

⁵⁵⁰ In Pueblo Gallinal there is no preexisting planta urbana into which MEVIR could build infill homes. Pueblo Gallinal was founded in 1990. The land was donated by Carlos Frascini, a citrus producer. See: *Pueblo Gallinal y la Zona* (blog) (2008).

⁵⁵¹ See: Carcamo (2010).

Monday morning and leaves on a Friday evening, following a timetable designed more for *maestros rurales* than for the people at large who live there.

On the drive, Romero shares a few interesting details about the obra she is working on in Nuevo Berlin, Río Negro (pop. 2,450), a town on the Uruguay River.⁵⁵² In a zone where land holdings tend to be larger, no one signed up for an area rural home.⁵⁵³ In an economic climate where prices for basic goods in Uruguay are up to several times more expensive than Argentina, contraband becomes an economic outlet for many residents.⁵⁵⁴ Romero explains that some participants and also some fishermen have been crossing the river in rowboats to bring back contraband. Violence and drugs are also problematic, to a greater degree than she is accustomed to when working on a MEVIR plan. Perhaps Romero's most interesting detail is that the MEVIR plan she is working on is not one contiguous nucleus. Since MEVIR had difficulties procuring land, the nucleus is split across three different parts of the town, a feature which is complicating the logistics of the obra.

As we pass an area rural home on the drive, Romero recalls working with a family who struggled to understand the value of indoor plumbing and did not want MEVIR to build them a bathroom. She has observed how families are often more interested in MEVIR interventions that improve their capacity to produce than those that help in terms of quality of domestic life.

⁵⁵² Giorgian de Arrascaeta, who has played in six international tournaments for the Uruguay national soccer team and won two Copa Libertadores with Flamengo of Brazil, grew up in a MEVIR home in Nuevo Berlín, one in which his family still lives. See: *Subrayado* (2019).

⁵⁵³ Nuevo Berlin is adjacent to Nueva Mehlem, one of Uruguay's largest estancias. As the names suggest, there is a connection to Germany. The first migrants to there, the Wendelstandt brothers, arrived in the area in 1859. They established the estancia Nueva Mehlem after having previously tried their luck in Argentina. As the estancia grew more profitable and the need for labor rose, the town was founded in 1870. Nueva Mehlem takes its name from Mehlem, a village on the Rhine just south of Bonn, from where the Wendelstandts hailed. See: *180* (2019).

⁵⁵⁴ These price differentials returned closer to parity following the assumption of Javier Milei as President of Argentina in late 2023.

Mastracusa shares a couple of details about when and why MEVIR uses notaries. Families building planta urbana and area rural homes require the use of a notary from the outset because they are dealing with land titles. Families in a nucleus do not have contact with a notary until deed signing. During the pre-obra stage, MEVIR's notaries are involved with land acquisition. She also mentions that until very recently (it was changed only during the current MEVIR administration), there used to be another step to the deed signing process. This involved an assembly before the promoción, where a social worker would go to the town and motivate families to pay their remaining balances.⁵⁵⁵ Not long before today's jornada, Mastracusa went to Montevideo to meet with Caterin Buriani, the notary in the MEVIR office who coordinates the supernumerary notaries across the country, to review each family's file for the promoción in Cerro Chato.

Romero is especially excited for the day and her eagerness to learn more about the area shines through her demeanor. She asked her boss, Adriana Berdía if she could work on the deeds in Cerro Chato, because she is already working in the area for a series of interventions MEVIR is doing around this part of Ruta 26. At a meeting of local actors, she met Mario, who is the referente of the plan. Unsurprisingly, we have a chance to catch up with him at the end of the meeting.

As we roll up to Cerro Chato, Romero observes the vecinos gathered outside the salón. She jokes to Mastracusa how people are wearing their best clothes because the notary is in town and is charging them for her services. When Romero gets out, she says loudly, "Watch out! Do not transfer your title to your kid if there is any chance they will want their own MEVIR home!"

⁵⁵⁵ Given the current administration's renewed focus on deed signing, this came as somewhat of a surprise to me. However, if it is viewed as a measure to cut costs, and if the benefits were deemed marginal, it makes sense.



Figure 29: The social worker Elena Romero (left), and the notary Cristina Mastracusa help families prepare to sign the deeds for their MEVIR homes in Cerro Chato, Paysandú Department (photo by author, 6 September 2022).

We set up for the event on a covered patio. People are crowding close to us, even though Romero asked them to leave us space. About a half of those present are under the awning and the remainder are seated on ledges or benches outside. On this sunny day, where signs of spring are slowly emerging, we are lucky to have a pleasant view.

In the main room of the salón, which is in good condition, the BPS is here to deliver social security as it is the first Tuesday of the month. When we walk in, Romero asks a gaucho if he is here for MEVIR. “No”, he rejoins, “I’m here for money.”.

My account of the families interviewed in Cerro Chato proceeds in much the same fashion as at González. However, I do not think I wrote notes for all of the families and in many cases I have fewer details. Unlike Cabrera, Mastracusa did not ask families whether they still inhabited the house and she only asked about children if the *titular* mentioned bereavement or divorce. Throughout the morning, I found it remarkable that people did not mind waiting for up to three hours for their name to be called. MEVIR could institute a pre-ordained time slot, but in places where it feels as if time is suspended, that may be beside the point. Moreover, an occasion where MEVIR brings people together, especially those who no longer live in the pueblo, allows old friends and neighbors a rare chance to catch up.

The first woman to come to the table has lost contact with her husband and needs to find him for the deed. They have a son who “doesn’t even remember him.” Romero asks this woman for the son’s number, so that she can call him. Mastracusa reassures her there is “no need to be nervous.” The “lost” husband will either cede his rights to the son, or the son and his mother will sign together.

Next, a gaucho bolts out of his chair. “*Soy nomas*”, he affirms, when Mastracusa asks if he is still single.⁵⁵⁶

The ensuing family needs a birth certificate for all nine of their children. One of these is going to Chile soon for seven months. Eight of the children were born to the mother through her late husband. The ninth came from a different another father. Mastracusa assures that we do not need to worry about this ninth child, because he is not a part of the late husband’s inheritance.

A woman needs divorce papers.

A man did a house with his mother, and she later died. He subsequently formed a relationship, and his girlfriend lives with him here. Romero assures him the girlfriend will not be kicked out.

A woman will use her fingerprint on the deed document, because she is unable to sign. She does not know how to write. Illiteracy has not entirely been eradicated in Uruguay.

A woman duly has photocopies of all six of her children.

A woman who now lives in Paysandú.

A widow with thirteen children. The youngest, at fifteen years old, is the only minor still and is studying in Paysandú. All thirteen children have contact with their mother. She hands over her cuota payment receipts, but Mastracusa explains that we do not need these today and she writes on a scrap of paper all the documentation that will be required.

A man has separated from his wife, who now lives in San Javier (Río Negro).

The next man immediately regrets to inform us that he has no documents, “I didn’t bring anything. I couldn’t find anything.” His wife lives in Young. They are separated, but not

⁵⁵⁶ In Uruguayan Spanish, the word “*nomás*” (often with the “s” left unpronounced), meaning “only”, or “just”, is commonly used to express emphasis.

divorced. Mastracusa tells him that he does not need to divorce for his children to inherit. Neighbors had told him otherwise.

Romero's sense of fun helps everybody to get through the morning. When one participant proudly recites the number of their house, Romero jokes that once you have an hornero number, you never forget it.

A woman says she has nine children and Romero says aloud so the group can hear, "*que fértil este lugar*" (what a fertile place).

Romero asks if there is anyone else left from Plan I. She reads off the names remaining on her list to see if anyone knows their whereabouts. They say one man who is not present lives in Tacuarembó.

We proceed with Plan II.

A woman is embarrassed because she has to count by hand how many children she has by a man. She wants to make sure to not inconvenience them.

An octogenarian is the joint holder with his daughter, who has left the home. Romero jokes, "it's a kid with a MEVIR house." He had been waiting a long time this morning. He has five children. One son works in Montevideo as a security guard. He needs to contact his wife, who has left him. Romero asks for the phone number of the child with whom he gets along best. A son works in Paysandú at a print shop (*imprensa*), and they see each other every Saturday. This son has a notary. As for the daughter, he says in criollo, "*la muchacha joven no quiere ver más viejo*" (the young lady doesn't want to see any more old men). To all the tenants, MEVIR gives a folder bearing the wording "MEVIR CONGRATULATES YOU", which participants can use to store their documents.⁵⁵⁷ The octogenarian puts his documents back into this folder and then he

⁵⁵⁷ The text of the cover is as follows.
"MEVIR CONGRATULATES YOU."

further places this into a multi-gallon bag of Adria brand pasta, which provides a sign of what and how people eat in these remote places.

A family that has eighteen children.

A participant who wants to cede their rights to their granddaughter.

A woman whose husband cannot be here today because he has a dentist appointment in Paysandú. But he will come to the signing.

A woman with around 60,000 pesos in debts to MEVIR.

Romero explains to a woman asking about terreno propio that MEVIR thinks about housing solutions for today. She can cede the rights to her child when they turn 18.

The last participant is a sensitive and complicated case. A woman is one of ten siblings by her mother, seven of whom have MEVIR homes. Many of the siblings are not on good terms. The woman's father died during the obra and her mother died this current year. She has lived in the home for the whole time, sharing it earlier with her mother. She took care of her late mother, even when she had a child of her own for whom to care. Some of her siblings were jealous of this and they want to sell the home. She has asked MIDES to help. Mastracusa assures her that MEVIR will not evict her. One of the sisters shows up just now. These two are ones on good terms. Romero explains inheritances through the analogy of slices of a cake. She urges her to not give her siblings any money until things are signed. Mastracusa concurs that "before you fight,

You are living in the house that you built.

[Hornero logo]

Help others to have the same possibility.

THIS ENVELOPE CONTAINS IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS

REMEMBER:

-YOU MUST COMPLY WITH PAYMENTS TO BECOME **OWNERS**

-IF YOU HAVE ANY DIFFICULTY PAYING **CONSULT WITH MEVIR**

-IF YOU DO NOT PAY ON TIME, **YOU WILL LOSE THIS HOME AND OTHERS WILL NOT HAVE THEIR OWN HOME**

you have to make agreements,” and encourages her not to let this matter become embroiled in bureaucracy.



Figure 30: This Google Maps aerial view of Cerro Chato, Paysandú shows an example of a town whose housing stock is mostly homes in MEVIR nuclei (in the southeast corner). Note the predominance of agroforestry plantations flanking the town.

Afterwards, we chat with Mario the referente. “*Pueblo chico, infierno grande*”, (Small town, big hell) he jokes, about his home and all the family drama we have just witnessed. Police come daily from Gallinal to the MEVIR-built commissary across from the salón, but Mario would like a stronger law enforcement presence. “When they get called, they usually don’t stay

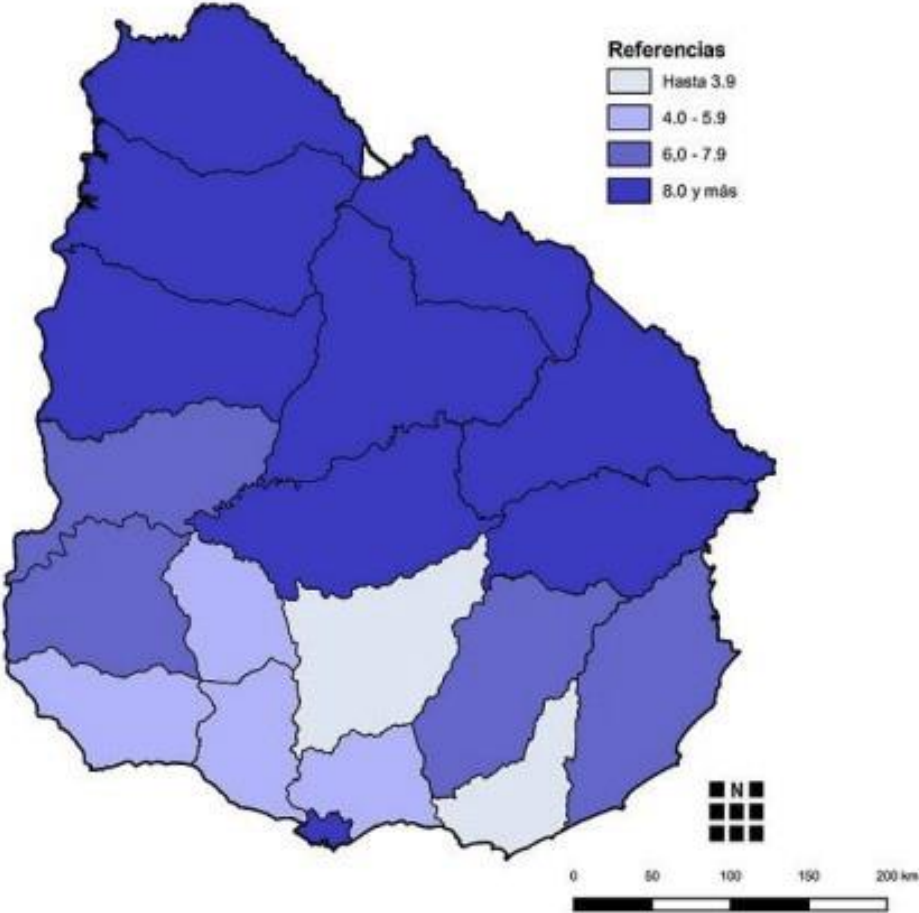
very long or look very deeply. You have to fight for this.” He tells me how the original pre-MEVIR Cerro Chato was mostly a place made up of mud houses. Many people left here to live in the earlier plans in Gallinal. Mario wanted to stay in Cerro Chato. He recalls that when they did these plans twenty-five years ago, agroforestry had not yet arrived in the region. Mario signed up with his mother for the MEVIR plan, as a way of circumventing the fact that at the time, MEVIR did not let single adults participate.

On the way out of town we stop for a second to admire the flat-topped hill that gives the town its name, a rocky outcrop some eighty yards long and a few stories high. On the way back to the highway, the roadside is lined with oranges that must have been spilled from a truck. Romero only started working for MEVIR in 2016 but she is full of cogent observations about the organization. She jokes that you can guess which social worker did any given plan based on how well-kept the houses are. Discussing mutual aid on the obra, she remarks that to have a *colaborador* do some of your hours takes money, and many families cannot afford this. Reflecting on the promoción today, she compliments Mastracusa for doing a great job of simplifying concepts for people with little education. “It is important that we are clear to them that this service is free, because notaries often swindle folks in poor, remote places.” The two have done escrituras together before. They muse about how different towns approach the event differently. They once had a jornada that combined the deed signing in two Paysandú towns in a single day (MEVIR tries to consolidate these outings as much as is feasible). At Porvenir, there was not even a single balloon. In Lorenzo Geyres, the vecinos pulled out all the stops, including an *asado de cuero*, where a cow is roasted in its own hide over an open fire.

Observing the promociones in González and in Cerro Chato enriched my understanding of general contrasts between the north and the south in Uruguay. These respective events also

illustrated that MEVIR has a consistent process ready for shepherding families into the ownership stage, but it also has flexibility built into this process given that life circumstances in one town can vary significantly from another.

Mapa 1 - Porcentaje de hogares debajo de la LP por departamento Año 2020



Fuente: INE, Encuesta Continua de Hogares

Figure 31: This 2020 map shows the percentage of households by department that live below the poverty line (source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Encuesta Nacional de Hogares).

In Cerro Chato, three of the first four families did not have their own notary. This trend continued throughout the day. In Cerro Chato, people were less likely to remember dates such as deaths, births, and marriages with precision. They were also less likely to have a married civil state. They were more likely to have large families.⁵⁵⁸ Almost everyone in Cerro Chato had poor teeth. In Cerro Chato, a lot more people had died since the plan, many within the last few years, though no one mentioned COVID. This could be in part because five more years had elapsed between the inauguration and escrituras in Cerro Chato than in González. This is an important point in itself, in that it had taken longer for a critical mass of families to be ready to sign. Similarly, there were more families in Cerro Chato who still had cuota debts to finish paying. Regarding Romero and Mastracusa's point about how locals relate to notaries, the body language of families in Cerro Chato suggested they were less versed in dealing with professionals. Perhaps the most important difference is that people's situations in Cerro Chato seemed to have changed less than those in González. As a place farther removed from other cities and towns, there are fewer opportunities and more inertia.

Two further observations, though largely irrelevant to the way MEVIR operates, are fascinating from a cultural geography standpoint. Corroborating a difference I have noticed between ranching zones in the north and commercial farming or dairy zones in the south, men in Cerro Chato were more likely to have moustaches, whereas those in González were more frequently clean shaven.⁵⁵⁹ In both González and Cerro Chato, almost all the surnames of participants were Spanish (these were never colonial zones or saw much Italian immigration). However, in González, most people *look* Spanish, whereas in Cerro Chato, the majority appear to have some degree of indigenous and African heritage, even if many of them have blue eyes.

⁵⁵⁸ This raises a public health question of possible differential access levels to birth control.

⁵⁵⁹ Beards are more common in Montevideo.

SIGNING THE DEEDS

Public deed signing ceremonies are the last official contact between participants and MEVIR. Like the inaugurations, they are also one of the most important moments in participants' lives. The ceremonies mark the fact that families can now do anything they like to their homes without needing MEVIR's permission. Moreover, they revindicate the importance of private property, something that distinguishes MEVIR from many other housing solutions. Memory looms large in these events as evidenced by the photos displayed and the testimonies given. These are celebrations not just of the abstract idea of ownership, but of how families have improved their lots in the roughly two and a half decades since they came into contact with MEVIR. These are political events, but the number of journalists and high-ranking officials tends to be smaller than at inaugurations. Moreover, the event itself, save for decision of the timing, is organized by the local neighborhood commission.

Even after the deeds, MEVIR remains present in the lives of families, most visibly through the hornero tile they see every time they enter their house. This is true both through the links and memories MEVIR has created, and because (on account of MEVIR's policy of covering the entire rural territory of the country, it will likely come to town again). Families who participated in previous plans are important sources of knowledge both for MEVIR technicians and for the next generation of participants (many of whom are related to prior ones). This becomes especially true as families retire and thus find themselves with more time to help out.

The vagaries of fieldwork often mean doing things outside of order. By the time I went to the promociones in González and Cerro Chato, I had already been to four deed signing ceremonies, my accounts of which follow. Compared to promociones, the ceremonies

represented a chance less to learn about the circumstances of individual families, and more about what deed signing means to a community in a collective sense.

Paso de Pache (Canelones), 30 May 2022

Not all settlements that are comprised almost entirely of MEVIR homes are in remote ranching and agroforestry areas. In the northwestern corner of Canelones, Paso de Pache (pop. 147) existed as a “lieu dit” prior to a MEVIR plan built there in the late 1990s.⁵⁶⁰ There are 50 nucleated homes, and 35 of the families are signing today. Two families are out of town today and will sign next week in Montevideo. The rest still need to arrange their deed.

When I arrive, the salón comunal has been decked out for the occasion. Streamers and balloons adorn the ceilings. Three cakes sit on a table. They are decorated with edible renditions of photos of the obra and of the MEVIR logo. On the wall is a Styrofoam board of photos from the obra and the inauguration. In one of these pictures, José María Mieres is handing keys to participants. In another, students from the local grade school smile festively, dressed in their tunics and bows. Teresa Sangiovanni, who worked on the plan and is here today, shows me another photo of herself with two participants, a set of twins, who are now deceased. A young girl, who is tugging on her grandfather’s arm in the photo, lives in his house and she is signing today. There is even a black-and-white aerial photograph of the then-brand-new nucleus. This makes visible the honeycomb shape of urbanism that MEVIR has long preferred in lieu of an orthogonal grid. Plastic chairs have been placed in rows from which people can watch the speeches, but the place is packed, and most of these people have to stand. Set beside the chairs is

⁵⁶⁰ French geographers use the term “lieu dit” to connote a place that is spoken of but does not necessarily appear on maps or in official records. See for example, Brunet (1989), p. 95. When MEVIR builds a nucleus, it turns such “spots in the road” into towns, both in a physical sense, and in a discursive or toponymic one.

a long table on which the signings will take place, giving enough room for the participants, their notary, MEVIR's notary, its president and a board member.

After the formal introduction of the event by MEVIR deputy communications director Juan Pozzi, a participant named Mariela is the first to speak. She recalls with precision how in February 1995, she and others started a commission of neighbors, a thing that was crucial for persuading MEVIR to come. On 12 October of that year, they signed an agreement with MEVIR.

Juan Pablo Delgado begins his speech by telling the families signing today that “MEVIR is always at your side.” He highlights his administration's commitment to escrituras by sharing that last year, MEVIR facilitated deed signings of a record of seven hundred homes. “Today,” Delgado signals, “signifies the juridical certainty that no one can take your house away.” Suggesting how the institution has itself adapted since this plan was built, he adds that “MEVIR is a social policy of rurality and decentralization that has *aggiornado* to the current times.”

Dressed in a red zippered jacket and a navy blue scarf, the next speaker is Leonardo Mollo, the alcalde of Santa Lucía, the municipality to which Paso de Pache belongs. Mollo grows emotional as he tells the crowd that today's event holds resonance to him, because his parents were renters for their entire lives. “Today means lots of rejoicing and relief,” he concludes. Leonardo Castro, Delgado's political secretary, who has an intimate knowledge of Canelones politics, tells me in an aside that Mollo is from the Frente Amplio and that Santa Lucía is a *frentista* stronghold.⁵⁶¹ The fact that no one even mentioned publicly that leaders from competing parties were taking the stage today illustrates the extent to which cross-party collaboration is ingrained in MEVIR.⁵⁶²

⁵⁶¹ Leonardo Castro attributes the strength of the FA in Santa Lucía (pop. 16,742) to the historical presence of shoe manufacturing in the town (personal communication, 19 May 2024).

⁵⁶² Sometimes cross-party collaboration is addressed more explicitly. For example, a MEVIR plan in Solís de Mataojo, Lavalleja was started during the third FA administration and finished during the current administration. I

Speaking on behalf of MEVIR from a more technical perspective than Delgado are the notary Caterin Buriani, and the social worker Viviana Pérez, both of whom happen to hail from rural areas of Canelones.⁵⁶³ “The day of the signature has arrived!” they begin. They explain to the audience how there is a several-month long process of making sure everyone’s situation is regularized and that there is a legal imperative to formalize the transfer of land from MEVIR to families. In this process, they add, many sectors of the organization intervene, and Pérez outlines the tasks of different parts of the MEVIR office.

A local notary, Marcela Barreiro, reads off a typical deed. This is for the purposes of transparency. It is an effort to inform the audience about the juridical peculiarities of the deeds and to affirm MEVIR as a juridical action and process. This is not a quick read and Barreiro cites law after law that holds bearing for the deeds. There is a collective sigh of relief when Barreiro finally finishes. A participant gets up from his chair, and unprompted, calls for a round of applause to honor Alberto Gallinal, “without whom this wouldn’t have been possible.”

Though the verbiage in the deeds may appear to be soporific, especially when read aloud word for word to an audience who are tired of standing up, it speaks to a very important point about MEVIR. MEVIR’s specificity to place is not limited to the emotional, cultural and physical. It is also a legal matter. MEVIR is a national project, not merely in the sense of promoting patriotism, building citizenship, and reaching across national territory. MEVIR is distinctly Uruguayan in that it deals with, and only with, this nation’s laws. The document

attended the inauguration in April 2022, where Juan Pablo Delgado and the previous MEVIR president Cecilia Blanco celebrated together. They spoke about the importance of carrying out a state policy even if your political adversary started it.

⁵⁶³ Pérez grew up on an oregano farm in Totoral del Sauce on Ruta 7 not far outside of Montevideo. On the ride back to Montevideo from Paso de Pache, she tells me how her parents, around the 1990s, were forced to switch to growing carrots, on account of cheaper Chilean oregano flooding the Uruguayan market.

Barreiro is reading would not only be legally void in another country, but it would also require translation into a different juridical system in any effort to make sense of it.

At last, we are ready for signing. Pozzi announces each family's name to a round of applause as they come up to the table. With each family, their respective signing document is passed around the table until all the title holders, MEVIR representatives, and notaries have signed.



Figure 32: Leonel and Orfilia, participants in Paso de Pache, Canelones Department, celebrate signing their deed. They show a picture of Orfilia at the inauguration of homes in the late 1990s (photo by author, 30 May 2022).

Afterwards, I have the chance to chat with two of the signatories. Leonel and Orfilia have been married for 66 years and worked in a tambo. They are eager to show me a photo of them at the inauguration some 25 years earlier. “I retired with 85 pesos” Leonel says with a smile. One of their sons is a MEVIR oficial, currently working on the plan in Minas de Corrales. I ask Leonel about his stocking cap, which bears the logo of ANDA, short for *Asociación Nacional de Afiliados* (National Association of Affiliates), a non-profit civil association and fraternal organization that has provided medical, financial, and other services to its members since 1933. Among these other services are group excursions. Thanks to MEVIR Leonel and Orfilia have their home, and thanks to ANDA, they see their country on trips with other ANDA members from the Santa Lucía area. This is something they cherish after a career where the daily demands of milking severely constricted their geographical mobility.

Leonel and Orfilia reminisce about their experience with MEVIR to Pozzi and Carina Folle, who will post a story about them on the organization’s social media.⁵⁶⁴ “Even if we asked to lower our payments during some years, we never stopped paying our cuotas, and in that we feel a great joy.” Leonel adds that he never stopped taking care of his house, using what he learned while on the obra.

Chapicuy (Paysandú), 28 June 2022

Sitting at kilometer 455 of Ruta 3, Chapicuy (pop. 735) is a place familiar to people driving from Montevideo and Paysandú to Salto. It is also the turnoff point for the Meseta de Artigas, the bluffs overlooking the Uruguay River just south of the Purificación encampment. Here, José Gervasio Artigas established from 1815 to 1820 the provisional capital of the Federal League, a polity that united the Oriental Province (the territory that is now Uruguay) with the

⁵⁶⁴ MEVIR (@meviroficial), Instagram post, May 31, 2022.

Argentine provinces of Entre Ríos, Corrientes, Misiones, Córdoba, and Santa Fe. Visitors to the Meseta can see the *prócer*'s exploits commemorated in a giant bust of Artigas, which sits atop a 37-meter-tall column erected in 1899.

Chapicuy, with 163 nucleated homes across three plans inaugurated in 1994, 1998, and 2010, respectively, is a great example of MEVIR taking a town and making it more viable. Granted it helps also that this town is located less than an hour along a major highway (by Uruguayan standards that is; it contains only one lane for each direction) from two of the largest cities in Uruguay's interior.

Today, 36 families are signing their deeds. Of these, 33 are from Chapicuy's second plan. But there is also a family from the first plan and one family each from plans in Quebracho and Lorenzo Geyres, who are taking advantage of the event so they do not need to travel to Montevideo in order to sign.

The *vecinos* have laid out several cakes along with commemorative magnets reading "our dream realized", but unlike in Paso de Pache, there are no pictures on display. The event is due to start at eleven, but we wait an extra fifteen minutes to see if Paysandu's intendente Nicolás "el Gordo" Olivera will show up. Meanwhile, I chat for a bit with another local politician, Juan Carlos "Carlucho" Moreno of the Chamber of Deputies. Moreno wears cargo pants and has gaps between all his bottom teeth. Gregarious and jocular, he is eager to tell me with a wink and a nod that he is bilingual: "*en español y castellano*", the two words Uruguayans use interchangeably to refer to the Spanish language. Someone receives a text with Olivera's apologies that he has an event at the UdelaR branch campus in Salto, and so the event begins. Juan Pozzi has used the delay to edit his introductory remarks, which he gives using formal language, making sure to mention the titles of all the dignitaries speaking.

A participant named Ariel speaks on behalf of his group, “Time passes and memories remain. That is life. Many of us now have grandkids.”

Edith Richard, the retired doctor on MEVIR’s board speaks on behalf of the institution, reminding everyone that “mutual aid also means paying your cuotas so that other Uruguayans can have their homes.”

The alcalde of Chapicuy invokes Gallinal and tells participants to enjoy and take care of their houses.

Pozzi introduces Caterin Buriani, along with the Fray Bentos-based MEVIR social worker Cecilia Gadea, prefacing that MEVIR is both a social and a juridical institution. Buriani and Gadea elaborate, noting for example that deaths of participants mean more legal and notarial work.

Again, a local notary reads a sample of a deed, which includes the all-important date of 26 August 1998, when Chapicuy’s Plan II was inaugurated. Examples of details the deed covers are the dimensions of the plot, the cost of the land, and sanitation. In the car ride back (which includes a stop in Young for a snack of *galleta doblada* at the El Molino bakery), Pozzi and I ponder whether the entire deed needs to be read aloud. He had timed the reading in Paso de Pache at a whopping twenty-two minutes.

Speaking as MEVIR’s building director, Ariel Amen tells the public about MEVIR’s difficulty with acquiring land for a new plan in Chapicuy (see Chapter Three) and announces the new series of plans on the Ruta 26 axis in Paysandú. Later during the signings, Amen comments in an aside to Moreno and other political friends of the Colorado Party that intendente Olivera (a blanco) approached MEVIR before the last electoral campaign in order to find out where the institution would build so that he would know what specific promises to make. On the ride back I

ask Amen more about this and he says that the Río Negro's intendente Omar Lafluf did the same. They were both following the advice of a MEVIR board member.⁵⁶⁵

Around a third of the surnames read during the signings were German, a reality I had already suspected by looking at the faces in the crowd.⁵⁶⁶ One such face I met after the signings was the septuagenarian Baldomero Kramer, sporting a neat moustache, a gold scarf, and brown leather boots. My conversation with Kramer provided fascinating insight into networks that link the Old World with the New and the breadth of rural lives that MEVIR seeks to serve.⁵⁶⁷

Kramer grew up some fifteen kilometers ("you turn off at kilometer 441," he tells me) south and east of Chapicuy in Santa Blanca, one of the first agricultural colonies founded by the newly established INC in 1944.⁵⁶⁸ His parents were one of the colony's four original families. They were ethnic German wheat farmers who fled Siberia following the Russian Revolution. They stayed briefly in Germany, and soon moved to Brazil, where as Kramer tells me, the Brazilian government took their passports and sent them to Mato Grosso. Believing that Uruguay would be a better place to put their work ethic into action, they made their way southward and escaped on bamboo rafts down the Uruguay River (in an era before hydroelectric dams) as far as the falls of Salto Grande, just north of Salto. When Kramer and his wife came of age, they decided to move to West Germany, motivated by economic factors. Helped by personal connections and knowledge of the language, they settled in Ulm in 1973, where they both

⁵⁶⁵ The broader point here is that intendentes do not decide where MEVIR goes (and many of them do not even push for bringing obras to specific towns), but they do maintain relationships with the organization in ways that increase their political salience.

⁵⁶⁶ Near Chapicuy are two colonies that were largely settled by Germans. These are Santa Blanca and Santa Kilda. As the couples coming up to sign bear witness, intermarriage between colonos and criollos in Chapicuy is not uncommon. Santa Blanca and Santa Kilda are much less closed than stricter religious colonies like the Gartental Mennonite community, which is located between Young and San Javier.

⁵⁶⁷ The story of Kramer and his wife (also from the colony) is also told in a publication of Uruguay's Plan Agropecuario. See: Bartaburu and Aviaga (2015).

⁵⁶⁸ The land for the colony previously belonged to the BHU. Kramer tells me that it was previously used for ranching.

worked in automotive factories.⁵⁶⁹ As their daughters got older, Kramer and his wife decided they wanted return to Uruguay and to the colony, and in 1984 they bought a plot in Santa Blanca with money they had saved in Germany. Over the subsequent years, Kramer and his wife have worked in multiple aspects of agriculture, from cheese making to beekeeping to growing fruits with which they make sweets. All of these ventures have been aided by the proximity of markets in Salto.

The Kramer daughters run a roadside shop in Chapicuy that sells many of these goods (another roadside attraction in Chapicuy is a monument to Los Iracundos, a rock and pop group founded in Paysandú in 1958 whose romantic ballads set hearts throbbing across Latin America). Both daughters became participants in the second Chapicuy plan in 1998, and Kramer is here today to celebrate their signing. I ask Kramer about MEVIR. He recalls a visit of the longtime intendente Jorge Larrañaga to the colony. Kramer told Larrañaga how much he liked MEVIR but added that the organization needed to build in the campo and not just in towns. It needed to do this in Kramer's view because whenever residents of a colony with housing need move to a nucleus in town, the colonies from where they come fall apart. This is a pattern he has witnessed across the country.⁵⁷⁰ When Kramer went to the school in Santa Blanca, he reminisces, there were 73 students. Now, there are seven.

Arbolito and Bañado de Medina (Cerro Largo), 26 July 2022

Today, MEVIR is streamlining its flow of work by holding deed signing ceremonies in two towns in Cerro Largo, Arbolito (pop. 189) and Bañado de Medina (pop. 2017). The fact that

⁵⁶⁹ Kramer informs me that many families from the colony around the same time moved to Stuttgart to work in a Mercedes plant.

⁵⁷⁰ This is true for all rural communities, not just colonies. However, this decline may be felt more acutely in agricultural colonies that at their best had a stronger sense of community and culture than a group of dispersed dwellings for ranch laborers.

few families are signing also makes this a feasible jornada. Of Arbolito's plan of 15 nucleated homes, 8 deeds are being signed today, while of Bañado de Medina's 27 nucleated homes, 6 deeds will be signed.

The social worker tasked with today's deeds is Diego Duarte, but this does not deter Silvia Cuello from taking the day off and partaking in the festivities.⁵⁷¹ We leave Montevideo before daybreak and head up Ruta 8 in her own vehicle. It is important to Cuello to be present today. She was involved in the plans as a substitute during the beginning of her time in MEVIR and she wants to support her colleagues. It is also a chance for her to see friends in her hometown of Melo. She rarely finds the opportunity to return here, as her family live almost entirely in the south. Soon after sunrise, we stop in Minas at a bakery across from the ANCAP to pick up breakfast. I am intrigued by a complicated looking bizcocho and ask the girl behind the counter what it is. "Ham and cheese with coconut cream", she answers. "Why not?" I respond, and take some, which Cuello and I enjoy as we get back on the road.⁵⁷²

Much of Ruta 8 between Treinta y Tres and Melo is built along a ridge, one that allows for sweeping views, something rare for Uruguay. Arbolito is particularly well-situated, looking out over rolling *cuchillas* (ridges) that are used for extensive cattle raising, and increasingly, agroforestry and wind power. The original settlement consists of two groupings of twenty-some homes about a kilometer apart and somewhat set back from the highway. The MEVIR plan was built in between them. It is located conveniently along the highway and across from the *parador*, an all-purpose restaurant and store for weary travelers.

⁵⁷¹ When MEVIR releases employees for an event, it is almost always to an inauguration and not escrituras.

⁵⁷² Uruguayans enjoy their "*agridulce*" (sweet and sour) dishes, such as *pionono* (pastry dough with fillings in a spiral shape), or even a ham-and-cheese cake glazed in sugar.

When Cuello and I arrive, Duarte and MEVIR's supernumerary notary for Cerro Largo, Fabiana Martínez, a lifelong friend of Cuello, are confirming which families are signing today and discussing how the event will go. Interior-style cumbia is playing in the background. The salón comunal holding today's event is not an ordinary one. Alicia Barrios, who was the main social worker on the plan, tells me its background. The architect for the plan, Galdona, took advantage of a preexisting structure on the land that MEVIR owned, an abandoned *pulpería* (a general store with a saloon). Half of the building is the reconstructed *pulpería* and the other half is a more traditional MEVIR salón. The building stands out due to its use of red Spanish roof tiles and exterior masonry of cut stones. Galdona, says Barrios, wanted the separation of old and new, and he even did the grill himself. A resourceful individual, he procured tiles at an auction in Melo and brought other items from as far away as Montevideo.

Barrios, in her element, is the center of attention, with many participants eager to see her and share a hug. She has made sure to retrieve old photos of each of the families signing today to give as gifts. Barrios and a participant reminisce how they worked together on the obra to write rules for how the salón comunal would be used. Sure enough, Barrios is thrilled to see a framed copy of these written rules on the wall of the salón along with other images, including miniature gaucho memorabilia. Barrios shows a photo from the inauguration in the late 1990s. She, Cuello, Galdona, and several others are pictured standing behind a giant cake, one topped with depictions of two MEVIR homes. Today's cake is less elaborate. But it is still MEVIR-themed, with the ovenbird logo and the text "*PLAN HORNERO MEVIR ARBOLITO.*" A vecino tells Barrios that they moved to Melo when they retired, because "health means that you move where the resources are." A participant, not from Arbolito, but from a plan in another Cerro Largo town, Cerro de las Cuentas, greets Barrios with joy. "Cerro Largo is almost all mine," Barrios jokes.

The vecinos who have come are dressed up a bit, at least by Uruguayan standards. There are not suits and ties, or formal dresses, such as would be worn at a quinceañera. But a good degree of thought has gone into sartorial decisions, especially for the men who do not have on clothes soiled by their labor on ranches.

Martínez, the notary, is absolutely beaming when telling me about MEVIR. “It is out of love. I would do this without pay.” I find out that she is married into a family I know in Cerro Chato (meaning the place carrying this name along Ruta 7), and we exchange stories about people we know in common. Returning to the subject of Arbolito, she tells me with amusement of a nearby estancia where some of the participants work. It is called “La Grávida” (Portuguese for “the pregnant woman”), because the husband is a pediatrician and the wife a gynaecologist.⁵⁷³

Lidia, one of the participants who hugged Barrios, starts off the speeches. She recalls some of the participants commuting to the obra on horseback. Construction workdays were sometimes difficult and sometimes fun. She thanks the capataces, oficiales, and Galdona for their teaching.

Delgado tells the crowd that “making your payments is a continuation of mutual aid. It means that more houses can be built elsewhere”. He mentions how MEVIR homes are both a social and an economic asset (*patrimonio*) to families and speaks about how the social worker is the most referential figure of MEVIR, singling out Barrios as exemplary. “MEVIR comes here to show up and work and to celebrate regardless of the size of town”.

The alcalde of Arbolito, Luis Segui, announces to applause that “we have land that we want to become MEVIR”.

⁵⁷³ Like ocean-going vessels, Uruguayan ranches are often named after women.

Jose Yurramendi, the intendente of Cerro Largo speaks next. In most such gatherings, it is clear at first sight, who the intendente is within a group of politicians. This is less the case for Yurramendi, who is smaller in stature, younger in age, softer in speech, and more modest in appearance (he shows fewer shirt buttons undone) than the more stereotypical blanco intendentes of the interior (examples of these would include Nicolás “el Gordo” Olivera in Paysandú, Alejo Umpierrez in Rocha, Omar Lafluf in Río Negro or Carmelo “Cacho” Vidalín in Durazno).⁵⁷⁴ Nevertheless, Yurramendi is polished in his speech and he captures the attention of the crowd. “Sacrifice, memory, and joy symbolize MEVIR and the Uruguayan people,” he proclaims. He continues pointing to the moral and practical benefits of the institution, “MEVIR is a place to transmit values. It means a family under one roof and not living between different relatives.”

After the signings, I chat briefly with a vecino. He tells me that the windmills a kilometer or so across the highway were put in about nine years before. Having MEVIR, he says, keeps people rooted and allows them to form a family.

A man carrying the surname Antunes, the local justice of the peace (an important figure in rural Uruguay) shares how there is still lots of work in the area around Arbolito, mostly for people working as peones rurales. Despite the fact that Arbolito is located only a half an hour from Melo, almost no one works in Cerro Largo’s departmental capital. Cuello is nearby and introduces herself. “¿Silvia cuanto? (Silvia, what’s your last name?)” Antunes asks. “Cuello. I’m Miguel’s daughter.” “Of course,” Antunes answers, “send him my regards. I was the judge at many weddings where he was the photographer.” Barrios has joined us and begins reminiscing with Antunes about the sweets made at the parador by a *señora* named Socorro, who is now deceased.

⁵⁷⁴ Yurramendi’s work background is not in the ranching sector, but rather in small businesses in Melo, including his family’s small-scale pasta making operation.

In order to reach Bañado de Medina, we drive through Melo, and then head southwest to the point where Ruta 26, the main east-west transversal highway in northern Uruguay which goes from Río Branco to Paysandú, meets Ruta 7. Bañado de Medina is the last stop before Melo on the abandoned railway line that parallels Ruta 7. There is an experimental station of the UdelaR's Faculty of Agronomy nearby, one named after the botanist Bernardo Rosengurtt (an important correspondent of Gallinal's), but it does not provide much work for locals. A retired agronomist at the escrituras tells me that compared to Arbolito, more people here look for work elsewhere, namely in Melo and Fraile Muerto.

I am taken aback when I arrive with Diego Duarte at the salón comunal, as Blanca, the de facto participant in charge, asks me whether I am the president of MEVIR. After I tell her I am not, she offers her backstory. In the 1990s, once the railway line was decommissioned, she went herself all the way to Montevideo to ask the president of AFE (Uruguay's state railway administration) if she and her family could live in the former railway station in Bañado de Medina.⁵⁷⁵ He obliged. Four years later, MEVIR came to Bañado de Medina, and she was selected as a participant. She criticizes her husband for not working much on the obra and for not going to assemblies.

When Barrios and Cuello arrive, they are mobbed by a queue of vecinos who are eager to share a long-awaited earnest embrace. When Duarte says to a bystander that Barrios was the social worker, Blanca claps and exclaims with joy. Barrios jokes to participants that "they hate me during the obra but love me afterwards."

⁵⁷⁵ Abandoned railway infrastructure has provided emergency housing across rural Uruguay. I have observed this in my own travels to photograph stations. At a MEVIR event in San Ramón, vecinos told me a similar story. On our jornada to González, I mentioned Blanca's story to Florencia Basanta, and she confirmed that cases of MEVIR participant families who have lived in railway stations with AFE's permission are common.

Blanca was not the only one to mistake my identity. Andrés, a notary from Fraile Muerto, asked Duarte if I was on the MEVIR board. I tell Andrés I am not, and I explain in turn why I am here. He answers me in English and we proceed to converse for a bit in my native language, the first and only time during the entirety of my trips with MEVIR that this ever happened.

Cuello served as a substitute social worker for Barrios on the plan, while the latter was on medical leave. Cuello herself was pregnant with her son at the time and she has brought photos of her son and daughter to show to participants who have not seen her in years. A group of school children dressed in their white tunics and navy-blue bows sit in some of the chairs provided.

Blanca speaks for the participants. She is glad they became her neighbors after the obra. She thanks the MEVIR authorities, Barrios, and Cuello.

In Delgado's speech, which is always slightly modified depending on the case, he highlights how having a MEVIR home is both an individual and a collective opportunity, adding that "the ovenbird continues to accompany you."

The alcalde speaks for no more than thirty seconds.

Yurramendi, the intendente, signals to the crowd that "sacrifice bears its fruits."

Juan Pozzi reads a letter from Alfredo Fratti, one of Cerro Largo's three members of the Chamber of Deputies, who is unable to be here.

Duarte, the final speaker, astutely shares that the work on this obra started exactly 23 years ago today. Addressing the participants, he exclaims that "the protagonists are you. We from MEVIR are the technicians."

Afterwards, Barrios once again shares culinary memories with locals, this time about the asados where an oficial by the surname of Marrero cooked up *mulita* (armadillo). A member of the local commission asks Duarte about what further involvement he will have in Bañado de

Medina. Reiterating his closing remarks, Duarte states that “the faces of MEVIR change from Alicia [Barrios] to Silvia [Cuello] to me, and many different presidents, but the constant in MEVIR is participants.”

SUMMONING MEVIR’S EXPERTISE AND REPUTATION FOR OTHER BUILDING PROJECTS

MEVIR’s work as a builder is not limited to the obra traditionally conceived (as discussed heretofore). The traditional conception of MEVIR is one where it comes to a town, having determined, as a part of the organization’s overall strategy, that there is housing demand, and having already procured the necessary land on which to build housing. Thanks to its expertise and prestige, MEVIR has also answered the call from other public bodies to serve as a builder. Doing this has often extended the geographic scope of MEVIR beyond small towns and dispersed rural areas.

When MEVIR works in these more populated cities of the interior, it does so only through *convenios*.⁵⁷⁶ Cristina Sienna gives the example of a pilot project in the Tres Cruces neighborhood on the outskirts of Rivera. This was inaugurated in January 2022, and MEVIR built nine homes using wood. These homes, although designed by its architects and built by its oficiales, are not MEVIR homes in a strict sense. They do not have hornero numbers. And the residents, while they did contribute some mutual aid hours, are not MEVIR participants in the traditional sense. They were not chosen through MEVIR’s selection process and they do not have to continue their mutual aid through rent payments to the institution.

⁵⁷⁶ Interview with Cristina Sienna, 22 March 2022. She also gives the example of a plan of 78 homes inaugurated in 2018 in the Cañada Aparicio neighborhood of Maldonado, where the Intendencia of Maldonado and the MVOTMA hired MEVIR as the builder.

The interinstitutional project was a collaboration between MEVIR and multiple other public bodies. The *Ministerio de Energía, Industria y Minería* (the Ministry of Energy, Industry, and Mining), or MIEM, analyzed energy efficiency, MVOT provided some additional technical knowledge (there are other social housing plans in the neighborhood), the *Ministerio de Ambiente* (Ministry of Environment) studied the sustainability of wood, the Intendencia of Rivera donated the land, and various private actors (including Ñande mentioned in Chapter Three) donated materials.⁵⁷⁷

As evidenced by Delgado's speeches, MEVIR has been very enthusiastic about introducing wooden homes into its repertoire, since these significantly reduce construction times and thus costs. Beyond this, there is an economic development logic behind this shift in building materials at a local and national scale. As agroforestry expands in Uruguay, there is a need to diversify the use of wood beyond processing it into cellulose paste.

MEVIR's building expertise also has a connection with news that traveled far beyond Uruguay's borders. José Mujica's government (2010-2015) made headlines for accepting Guantanamo detainees and Syrian refugees. The government settled one of the Syrian families in the town of Juan Lacaze (pop. 12,816) in Colonia, where MEVIR built a home for them to live in. They did not adapt to the town, and they decided, a couple of years later, to move to the much larger Salto.⁵⁷⁸

Since they occupy similar geographical spheres and they share similar social aims, the INC and MEVIR often work together. I managed to observe one such *convenio* during one of my obra visits to Capilla del Sauce. A twenty-minute drive outside of Capilla, next to a field full of lambs, Becerra gets out of the car at an old farmstead that MEVIR oficiales are working to

⁵⁷⁷ See Ministerio de Industria, Energía y Minería (2022) and Uruguay Presidencia (2022).

⁵⁷⁸ See *Colonia Noticias* (2017).

refurbish. He introduces me to Berrospe, the capataz. He grew up nearby on the Santa Clara estancia. His mother was a participant in the 1987 MEVIR plan in Capilla, and following this he was hired as a MEVIR oficial. On this project, one named after the 1815 land reform guidelines drafted by José Gervasio Artigas', the INC is the client in effect and MEVIR the builder. In this instance, INC hires MEVIR as if it were a construction company. The colonists do not become MEVIR participants (although this particular house is lived in by the father of a current Capilla participant), and thus the oficiales do not work in a teaching capacity.

There is even an example of a project where MEVIR was not involved, but its design was replicated. After our jornada for reassigning homes in El Oro, Silvia Cuello and I accompany Alicia Barrios to drive around the outskirts of Treinta y Tres. We are looking there at informal settlements, ones MEVIR may intervene in as part of a joint effort with the MVOT. In a neighborhood just off Ruta 8, I notice a series of homes that look identical to MEVIR homes of the 1980s. They show familiar curved roofs and include a covered porch above the front door on one half of the house. However, they do not bear hornero numbers and MEVIR did not intervene in the larger cities during its early days. I ask Barrios to clarify for me the nature of these homes. She explains that Wilson Elso Goñi, the intendente of Treinta y Tres from 1985 to 1989, was a good friend of Gallinal and an admirer of MEVIR. Working with Goñi, the BHU, which was closely connected with MEVIR at the time, liked its prototype so much that they borrowed it for this cluster of social housing homes.

Dolores (Soriano), 6 September 2022

Uruguay is not known for natural disasters. Guides for expatriates tout Uruguay's lack of them as a selling point for moving to the country. An Uruguayan friend who works at assessing risks in Uruguay for a major international aid organization, finds himself teased routinely that his

job must be boring. Nevertheless, the *paisito* is not entirely immune from natural hazards. In a mainly low-lying country, one containing lots of water courses and occasional severe rainfall, floods are a reality of life for many Uruguayans, especially in the west and center of the country. Floods in Durazno in 1959 are part of what precipitated MEVIR (see Chapter One). In 2007, this city was once again flooded, and MEVIR stepped in to rebuild homes for families who were affected.

Perhaps the most telling story of MEVIR coming to the rescue happened in Dolores. During the afternoon of 15 April 2016, a tornado touched down in Dolores (pop. 17,174). It tore through the middle third of the town's footprint, destroying around 400 buildings, injuring more than 200 people, and killing five. By Uruguayan standards this was a calamity, the strongest (F3-F4 on the Fujita scale) and deadliest tornado since an F4 killed eleven people in Fray Marcos in April 1970. The aftermath was the main story in the Uruguayan news cycle for much of the remaining fall.

MEVIR's role in the rebuilding efforts highlights its capabilities and what the institution means to other actors. Throughout my travels and interviews with its technicians, MEVIR's emergency obra in Dolores was often mentioned as a moment that brought MEVIR staff closer together and amplified MEVIR's value to the Uruguayan people. In an effort to understand this exemplary case of MEVIR's work beyond traditional obras, I felt it was necessary to see this through my own eyes.

The day of the tornado, Elena Romero, a Dolores native and resident, was able to find shelter. Six years on, following our jornada in Cerro Chato (Paysandú), we drive back to Dolores on a sunny afternoon that feels far removed from lethal storms. Romero is kind enough to drive me around the town, showing me buildings that were damaged, and others that have been

repaired or built anew. These last include some of the 60 homes and 12 repairs made by MEVIR along the remainder of 2016.

Romero provides background on Dolores, a town I had not yet visited. Situated in a flat, fertile terrain, Dolores is known as the “Granary of Uruguay”. When driving into the town from any direction, a visitor can see why. Any view of Dolores is dominated by the grain silos that dot the outskirts of town. Romero comments how the traffic of trucks carrying grain is so heavy that it has led to the erection of barriers blocking their path onto side streets. One of the people driving these trucks is Romero’s father. He takes grain from Dolores to the port of Montevideo and to the much closer river port of Nueva Palmira. He is employed directly by a rural producer, one who sells his grain to the three biggest companies in town, Erro, CADOL (the Agrarian Cooperative of Dolores), and ADP (Agronegocios del Plata). These companies own most of the silos, which double as prominent landmarks and points of orientation.

Employment such as trucking is a prime example of the state and nature of the local economy in Dolores, where, as Romero comments, “everyone has work.” This is something she says is not even true in the nearby departmental capital of Mercedes, a prosperous place by Uruguayan standards.⁵⁷⁹ Romero says with pride that even for university educated *doloreños*, people who studied in Montevideo like herself, Dolores has less brain drain than similarly sized towns in the interior. People simply like their town, she signals. Beyond the buoyant labor market, and a very high rate of homeownership, there is a high quality of life. This last is highlighted by a leafy riverfront promenade and park ideal for strolling and sipping mate. Dolores also mounts the National Festival of the Spring, where students from local schools put

⁵⁷⁹ María Fajardo, a member of the Chamber of Deputies representing Soriano, gives me a similar report (interview, 27 July 2022).

together a parade of floats. These floats are of considerable artistic quality, and they illustrate the town's community spirit.

Walking around Dolores the next day, what struck me most was the benches people place in front of their homes. This is not a phenomenon unique to this town. Indeed, you see this in small towns across the Río de la Plata, given how houses are generally built flush to the sidewalk and without space between the walls of the homes next door. Dolores stands out, however, for the number, quality, and variety of its benches. In Uruguay's climate, the bench functions as a front porch where the public meets the private, where you can see and be seen, enjoy the sun on a cold day and the shade on a hot day, usually with mate and thermos in tow. Dolores, unlike many corners of the Uruguayan interior, is clearly not a godforsaken place.

When the tornado hit, the MVOTMA needed to act quickly as it led rebuilding efforts. MEVIR provided an ideal partner. Eneida de León, the minister of housing at the time assured the public that "MEVIR can build between 30 and 40 homes in two to three months".⁵⁸⁰ As Romero expresses it, "MEVIR is the only public housing builder that does houses by memory." The institution selected one of its most experienced and trusted capataces, José Coitiño, to lead the charge. As Romero remembers, "Coitiño was on an obra in Cardona and MEVIR called him to go [to Dolores] the next day." MEVIR released three to four oficiales from each obra across the country and brought them to Dolores for much of the rest of the year. Federico Becerra recalls how this was an all-hands-on-deck endeavor, one that had an impact across the whole of the institution.⁵⁸¹ As the MEVIR homes were dispersed throughout Dolores, there was no central galpón de obra. Instead, MEVIR rented various sites around town to store materials and they kept an office in two containers, that were located next to a school in the neighborhood where it

⁵⁸⁰ *Montecarlo* (2016).

⁵⁸¹ Interview with Federico Becerra, 29 October 2022.

did most of its building. Eighty Castores, the high school volunteers, also came for two weeks to help MEVIR.



Figure 33: To the left is a MEVIR home built after the 2016 tornado in Dolores, Soriano Department. To the right is a nearby home built after the same disaster by a company called Schmidt (photo by author, 6 September 2022).

MEVIR's work in Dolores saw the completion of 60 new homes and repairs to 12 further ones.⁵⁸² The new builds were for families who had lost everything and did not have the economic possibility of obtaining credit to rebuild.⁵⁸³ Families did not want to pay MEVIR understandably. Instead, MEVIR demanded that these families work in mutual aid, led by a MEVIR social worker. This was a process with which doloreños were not familiar. As such, they bear MEVIR plaques, ones showing hornero numbers which also mention the MVOTMA. Romero tells me how many of the families, when looking back on the building process, are now grateful for contributing building hours. This had helped these people to work through pain and grief. MEVIR's transparency over the course of the obra, when compared to other organizations,

⁵⁸² These figures from my conversation with Romero differ slightly from a December 2016 report by the leading Uruguayan radio station *El Espectador* (2016) indicating that the Uruguayan executive branch counted 61 new homes and 16 rebuilds done by MEVIR.

⁵⁸³ *El País* (Uruguay) (2016b).

earned it a greater level trust from doloreños, Romero adds, and made it more likely to receive donations.

Romero is quick to point out that while rebuilding housing in Dolores helped to bring a community together, it also reinforced some social inequalities. The homes built by MEVIR were for families who had owned their homes before the tornado (many land titles blew away in this tornado, complicating the determination of who could access MEVIR's services, Romero adds).⁵⁸⁴ The families affected by the tornado who were renters went to live in 86 houses on municipal land. These houses were built by a company called Ebital, who was contracted by the state given its ability to build extremely quickly. The tornado happened during the grain harvest, and as Romero tells me, Dolores's big three grain companies pressured the government to have people rehoused as quickly as possible, because they needed to ensure their labor force. As Romero drives me past the Ebital site, the several two-story block buildings, which are painted in pastels, distinctly resemble a series of motels. Only the bicycles and laundry that is hanging diminish a sense of their temporary aspect.

The government hired another company, Schmidt, to build an additional 30 homes on land that people owned. The families selected for these Schmidt homes were chosen by MVOTMA, because their plots were in worse conditions, according to Romero. She shows me some of the Schmidt homes, which also appear more temporary, less sturdy, and less aesthetically pleasing than the MEVIR builds she is pointing out. To further illustrate her point that MEVIR's approach led to better results, she takes me to a few of its homes which she knows well.

⁵⁸⁴ According to Romero, this was the MVOTMA's decision.

The first belongs to a younger couple who had owned an empty plot and decided to build there. The wife tells me that her sister received a Schmidt house and has it quite worse. “Everything in her house is work. She can’t expand it and it gets really cold. You can’t nail things into the wall because it is structurally weak.”

The second home is near the CADOL silos. The owner jokes that “Elena [Romero] and [Fray Bentos based social worker] Sarita [Michelena] were my psychologists”. She is grateful for her MEVIR house, which is an upgrade from her previous home, one that was made of mud. Since finishing their MEVIR home, she and her family have made a number of additions, including a fence and placing a roof over the entirety of the porch. She recalls how the Intendencia of Soriano was helpful in acquiring furniture and how the UdelaR Faculty of Agronomy donated a lemon tree for each MEVIR home in Dolores. The house allows her daughter, who is in kindergarten, to grow up better. It has also given her a stable base, a home to return to as she travels across the country working on her passion of beauty contests. Talking to Romero, she says “you [in the plural, and thus referring to MEVIR] opened my mind. I decided to have my kid.”

A household name across Uruguay lived in the third home Romero shows me, a repair rather than a new build. Gastón “Dino” Ciarlo (1945-2021) was a well-known singer. He released over a dozen albums spanning candombe, rock, milonga, and beat. Ciarlo, says Romero, never made much money with his music.⁵⁸⁵ The tornado took with it his roof and his walls. Romero remembers Ciarlo becoming an enthusiastic participant on the obra, expressing to

⁵⁸⁵ Ciarlo is a quintessential case of the limited commercial horizon of musicians in Uruguay, however talented and beloved they may be domestically. This is yet another subject Federico Becerra and I discussed on our trips between Montevideo and Capilla del Sauce.

MEVIR his “pride in the blue hard hat.” Ciarlo’s penultimate album, released in 2017, included a song named after the date of the tornado, *15 04 16*, reflecting on the events.

*REFRAIN: Dolores, Dolores, Dolores
how much the poor people suffered*

*There were tears with blood
There were lost lives
There was anger, there was hunger
Lots of homes destroyed*

...

REFRAIN

*It’s true that there were wounds
That are healing
Everybody on the “obra”
Working and working
With one eye on the tool
And the other eye on guard
If they say there’s a storm
Better to get out now*

REFRAIN

*When a pueblo gets organized
It gives way to hope⁵⁸⁶*

“The tornado carried me to MEVIR,” reflects Romero. Before the tornado, Romero was vaguely acquainted with MEVIR since she visited small towns in Soriano in her capacity as a social worker for the MIDES but she knew little of the rest of the country. “When I entered, I knew nothing about MEVIR as an institution, and I found an entirely new world,” she tells me. When MEVIR’s obra was launched, they needed a locally based social worker to complement the efforts of Sara Michelena. “Sarita told me, ‘You’ll see that MEVIR works,’” remembers Romero. After the obra, she was contracted to do three months of post-obra work via the

⁵⁸⁶ In this context, pueblo carries the double meaning of “town” and “people”.

Waldensian church, which was heavily involved in recovery efforts. In January 2017, there was a call for two new MEVIR social workers. Romero was hired along with Viviana Pérez. Until some point during the current administration, the two focused on post-obra work. Romero treated everywhere west of Ruta 5 and Pérez everywhere to the east. Now, both are working more on obras. Romero tells me that in five years with MEVIR, she has learned more than in the rest of her working life. “Just now I’m getting to know my country,” she says. Romero carries this knowledge beyond her work. In her house, she keeps a map of the country and fills it in with pins of towns where she has worked. She takes care to teach her grade-school aged son geography through this map. “It is important for him to learn that people live differently in different places.”

CEREMONIAL AND SYMBOLIC FUNCTIONS NOT CONNECTED TO BUILDING

In addition to construction, MEVIR makes itself visible through a variety of discursive, ceremonial, and symbolic functions, with its communications office playing a central role. *El Hornero* is MEVIR’s in-house publication, a magazine-cum newsletter that has been released once or twice a year for nearly most of the last twenty years. Originally distributed in print, using glossy paper, it has recently taken on an exclusively digital format. The issues of *El Hornero* comprise around 32 pages and the content runs a wide gamut of topics, including an introductory editorial from MEVIR’s president, interviews with participants and employees, advice on such things as gardening and house maintenance, maps of MEVIR’s interventions, reminders about rules for renters, and news about MEVIR’s latest activities. *El Hornero* is mainly directed to an audience of participants, to whom it illustrates MEVIR’s transparency and introduces the revolving cast of authorities with each quinquenio. Moreover, it serves to maintain links between

the institution and participants, as well as establish a sense of a common cause between participants across the country.

Not all MEVIR events take place in the interior. I attended two public acts in prominent places in Montevideo. Both of these demonstrate how MEVIR is of enormous benefit to politicians.

The Legislative Palace, 5 May 2022

Built between 1908 and 1925 and designed by two Italian architects, Uruguay's capitol building (*Palacio Legislativo*) could not be farther removed from the workmanlike humility of MEVIR homes whose design engages heavily with the vernacular traditions of the *criollo* interior. By contrast, the palace is the embodiment of a mental construct of an Uruguay derived from Europe and looking towards the Atlantic. Atop a giant staircase, the neoclassical marble façade faces towards the port of Montevideo. The spacious interior is full of allegories rendered in stained glass, gilded columns, and patriotic paintings. This is the pinnacle of achievement in the catalogue of architectural marvels built in Montevideo during the boom years of mass immigration and exports of primary goods. It is also the most visible reminder of the strength of the *batllista* state. The siting of the building is moreover designed to catch one's attention, lying on a traffic island formed by the confluence of several major arterial roads.

In the entrance hall to the Chamber of Senators, many of the more senior in rank MEVIR employees, dressed more formally than usual, gather along with other prominent authorities and a handful of journalists. Today, MEVIR, together with the Correo Uruguayo, the Uruguayan postal service, is launching a stamp to commemorate MEVIR's fifty-fifth anniversary. It is also a chance for Juan Pablo Delgado, as MEVIR's highest authority, to report to parliament what his

organization has done in the previous year and what it foresees for the next year, all this in compliance with the Rendición de Cuentas, Uruguay's annual accountability proceedings.

Of all Delgado's speeches I heard, this one worked the best at summarizing MEVIR's accomplishments in national terms, given that he was speaking to a primarily national, rather than a local audience. He begins by reminding the audience of MEVIR's father figure, Gallinal, who "worked within and outside of the state." Noting that we are in the capitol building, he then refers to MEVIR's origins as a legal construction and ties this to a more recent legal action, how the 2020 Urgent Consideration Law amplified MEVIR's territorial reach.

"MEVIR", as Delgado stresses, "is not just a policy of the state (*política del estado*), it is also a national policy (*política del país*). The people make it their own by exercising social control, for example by taking care of their homes." "You can see mutual aid and *superación* [personal overcoming of obstacles] in both the participants and the employees. In MEVIR, there is no room for beneficiaries, only for participants who put in the work."

Given the nature of the event, which brings together MEVIR and the postal service, Delgado talks about the importance of convenios and how "MEVIR does not go solo to the places it works in." Delgado also highlights MEVIR's recent digital revolution, lauding the increasing numbers of participants who are now paying their cuotas through the MEVIR app, and gushing that putting *El Hornero* online has reduced the cost of this by tenfold.

In the bigger picture, Delgado emphasizes how MEVIR is a significant geographic and demographic phenomenon. He references that it has benefitted more than 140,000 citizens in over 400 localities. "MEVIR is like Uruguay's twentieth department," he claims.⁵⁸⁷ "It is not geographically contiguous but dispersed throughout the country."

⁵⁸⁷ The phrase *departamento veinte* is traditionally used in Uruguay to refer to the Uruguayan diaspora.

Irene Moreira, the Minister of Housing, begins her speech by proclaiming that “to talk about rural housing is to talk about Gallinal,” She signals Gallinal’s entrepreneurial spirit and how that continues today in an institution that “thinks about the fragile people of the interior”. “MEVIR doesn’t just give a key,” she notes. “The participants are part of the house, and they give life to it. MEVIR is not just the house, it’s the other things around it too, like tambos and plazas.” She cites the example of Mones Quintela in her home department of Artigas, where MEVIR has just completed 13 homes and a new network of potable water. She concludes with her birthday wishes, congratulating MEVIR on “turning a young 55 years”.

The Vice President of the Republic Beatriz Argimón is the next to present. Unlike the others, who remain seated, she walks up to the podium. As with Delgado and Moreira, she starts off by invoking Gallinal though, “a man of great social commitment.” Much of her speech focuses on MEVIR’s mystique. “MEVIR, just upon mentioning the name, captures an effect,” she says. “It is much more than talking about housing. It’s talking about home. It implies social integration.” Her final remark summarizes MEVIR’s effectiveness in the simplest terms, “MEVIR is a public policy that has succeeded in interpreting social reality.”

Coronel Rafael Navarrine, President of Correo Uruguayo, unveils the stamp, which bears the hornero logo and the homes of a nucleus. “To talk about MEVIR is to talk about an obra that is a hundred percent social,” he asserts. “It provides dignity and quality of life and allows rural workers to keep their roots in their *pagos*.”⁵⁸⁸ He expounds upon the visual effect of the stamp and how it relates to the institution. “The ovenbird is a social bird that sings and builds with its partner. Likewise, MEVIR’s ovenbird means work, effort, the importance of the social and the construction of community.”

⁵⁸⁸ “*Pago*” is a term used in Uruguayan Spanish and the Portuguese of Rio Grande do Sul to refer to one’s place or neck of the woods.

Rural del Prado, 12 September 2022

Unlike the Legislative Palace, the Rural del Prado is a Montevideo landmark where the inland portion of the pastoral city-state sits at front and center. Located in the expansive Prado Park, which is adjacent to the eponymous neighborhood known for old money and decaying mansions, the Rural del Prado is Uruguay's main fairgrounds.⁵⁸⁹ The grounds are a delight to walk through, centered on three mosaic-heavy pavilions for different types of livestock designed by the Catalan architect Cayetano Buigas, a contemporary of Gaudí best known for Barcelona's Columbus Monument.

The highlight of the Rural del Prado's calendar is a ten-day period in the first half of September. Officially known as the International Livestock Exhibition, International Agro-Industrial and Commercial Show, the Expo Prado has occurred annually since 1913, organized by the *Asociación Rural del Uruguay* (Rural Association of Uruguay), ARU, the most important and powerful assemblage of rural producers in the country. Akin to a state fair without the rides and glut of fried snacks (tortas fritas and churros suffice on that front), the Expo Prado sees thousands of people descend upon the capital from the interior. Nowhere in the capital can one expect to see a higher concentration of men wearing boinas and bombachas. It is also a chance for montevidianos to gain a glimpse of rural affairs without having to leave the city.

During the day, there are exhibits, competitions for best animal in show, and such events as cooking demonstrations with the latest stars of Uruguay's *MasterChef*. As with the state fairs in the United States, the Expo Prado is a place for politicians to make themselves visible and accessible. Different state organisms have a presence here, including those beyond agriculture and ranching. In Antel's sleek pavilion, fairgoers can participate in an interactive quiz on a giant

⁵⁸⁹ Until the death of his wife in the mid 1980s, Alberto Gallinal maintained his Montevideo residence a couple blocks from the Rural del Prado and he regularly attended mass at the nearby gothic-style Carmelite Church.

touch screen answering multiple choice questions about different departments. At the stand of the *Dirección General Impositiva* (the Uruguayan equivalent of the IRS), an employee leads school children in a game teaching financial responsibility. Intendencias have also set up their presence, with Canelones showing off its wine, Colonia its cheese, and Rocha its liquors and preserves made from the butia palm.

At the Expo Prado, the interior meets the capital, but so too does Uruguay meet the world. For the duration of the fair, various embassies devolve much of their activities to here. Visitors to the Mexican stand can sample mezcal. At the French stand, Uruguayans with roots in the Béarn region can trace their ancestry.⁵⁹⁰ The British stand even includes a section promoting economic development in the Falkland Islands. Private companies such as New Holland give visitors the chance to ogle their latest advances in agricultural machinery.

At night, younger crowds flock to the Expo Prado to sing along to musical headliners like Lucas Sugo, Chacho Ramos, and increasingly Matías Valdez, the latest cumbia del interior heartthrob. Valdez comes from Mendoza Grande (pop. 730), a town consisting mostly of MEVIR homes in Florida's dairy belt.

MEVIR maintains a permanent presence in the Rural del Prado, a model of a MEVIR home made to scale that comes to life during the Expo Prado. Each year MEVIR changes the displays in its exhibit to reflect current obras and particular emphases of the administration.⁵⁹¹ This year, while the aesthetics are welcoming and professional photos give candid glimpses of participants' lives, there is little information on MEVIR's history that would give context to an

⁵⁹⁰ Most of the French who migrated to Uruguay hailed from the southwest of France.

⁵⁹¹ Though the Rural del Prado fairground serves as the host to the only model MEVIR home, the organization does take its traveling exhibits to other events, such as a national sustainability exposition held in Montevideo's Parque Battle each June and the National Festival of Chickens and Hens held in San Bautista in February.

uninformed visitor.⁵⁹² When I visited in 2018, the focus was more about the technical details of construction innovations and the displays included a higher density of text than they currently do.

One day during each exposition, MEVIR hosts a launch of the stand with speeches and other activities. Today's activity is a celebration of four rural schools chosen from a pool of fifty-five from around the country. These four are the finalists in a drawing competition run by MEVIR and titled "Illustrate Your Community." As Carina Folle announces in her introductory speech, students from all four schools are present today, underlining MEVIR's link to education. Before the political discourses, a folklore singer from SODRE performs several songs. Environment and education are the focus of today's speeches, united around the common theme that MEVIR is committed to rural development in a holistic sense and not just to housing.

Delgado's talk today focuses on sustainability. MEVIR has brought guests besides the school children. These include participants in a MEVIR program in San José called Pequeñas Grandes Obras Rurales, who are selling homemade MEVIR-branded cheese. Delgado introduces them, telling the crowd that "having a home is part of being able to produce."

Robert Silva, a Paso de los Toros native, and the highest-ranking official in Uruguayan K-12 education, is next.⁵⁹³ His first words are directed to the schoolchildren. "*¿Cómo están chiquilines?*" (How are you, kids?) he asks. Revealing a reality of life in the interior, he continues his welcoming tone, "for some of you kids, this might be the first time you are in Montevideo." The maestra from the chosen school in Tacuarembó confirms that it is indeed the

⁵⁹² The MEVIR human resources director Gabriel Moreno says that it is remarkable how many montevideanos do not know what MEVIR is when they see its model house at the Expo Prado (interview, 9 June 2022). This makes the event an important moment for outreach.

⁵⁹³ At the time, Silva served as president of the ANEP. In Uruguay, the Ministry of Education and Culture is tasked with promoting the general directives of education policy and serving as a link between the autonomous entities of public education (the ANEP for K-12 and the UdelaR for tertiary levels), the executive branch, and authorized private education.

first time her students have come to the capital. Once he switches back to adult speak, he references MEVIR's history "*a lo largo y ancho de todo el país*" (across the length and breadth of the whole country) and its link with rural schools. "MEVIR", he states emphatically, "has forged the identity of rural Uruguay over time." Signaling the diversity of MEVIR's efforts, he asserts that "the rural sphere is not important just for production, but for everyday life."

Adrian Peña, a poultry producer in San Bautista, and, at the time of this event, Uruguay's Minister of the Environment, emphasizes how "MEVIR transcends governments." He continues by stressing how MEVIR also transcends entities within a government, announcing that his ministry received assistance from MEVIR to help refurbish some homes in Cabo Polonio, a balneario in Rocha, which students from rural schools can use for group vacations during the summer months. Linking today's themes of education and economic production again, Peña argues that Uruguay is a country that lives from and will continue to live from the campo. He ends his remarks invoking the words of a former conductor of the Montevideo Philharmonic Orchestra, "we will continue to work so that Uruguay can continue to be a small green triangle of land, where people breath pure air and can live better, as said the maestro [Federico] García Vigil."

Fernando Mattos, head of the *Ministerio de Ganaderia, Agricultura y Pesca* (Ministry of Ranching, Agriculture, and Fishing), or MGAP, references the difficulty Gallinal had initiating the MEVIR law during the 1960s.⁵⁹⁴ He underscores the importance that the transfer of funds from ranching have on MEVIR and mentions the institution as a successful example of decentralization. Himself a rancher with properties in Tacuarembó and Cerro Largo, he notes that

⁵⁹⁴ The order of words in the ministry's name is telling about the historical hierarchy of activities in Uruguay's primary sector.

northern Uruguay has a lot more necessities than the south. “We [MGAP] are in love with MEVIR,” he signs off.



Figure 34: At the Expo Prado, Uruguay’s annual agricultural exposition, held in Montevideo, a teacher from a one-room schoolhouse in Durazno Department gives a speech about a prize her students won in a MEVIR-sponsored drawing competition. Robert Silva, Uruguay’s highest-ranking official in K-12 education congratulates the teacher and her students (photo by author, 12 September 2022).

Just as Peña announces Rural School # 20 “La Economía” of Durazno as the winner of the drawing competition, he receives a call coincidentally from the intendente of the very same department, Carmelo “Cacho” Vidalín. Upon hearing the news, Vidalín, placed on speaker, exclaims, “This is Uruguay!”

After the event finishes, people continue mingling, carrying on informal conversations that lubricate the wheels of Uruguayan politics. Throughout the year, MEVIR had found me running into the same people on multiple occasions. And here I bump into Carlucho Moreno, the folksy “bilingual” diputado from Paysandú, who marvels on today’s event that “MEVIR is full of win-wins.”

While it may appear to be saccharine discourse served out for political purposes, both the speeches at the Expo Prado around the children’s drawing competition and the launching of the new stamp in the capitol building point to the heart of the matter. MEVIR is truly an original phenomenon. Most countries have ministries of education, agriculture, and environment. But how many countries have a sui generis rural housing initiative, let alone any unique institution connecting different state bodies to each other and to citizens in such a consistent and positive manner? MEVIR incites patriotism not just because it is a national policy. It does this because its results give people cause for pride at something happening within, and only within, their own national borders.

Conclusion: MEVIR Beyond Uruguay?

The preceding chapters were designed to provide a comprehensive portrait of MEVIR. They trace MEVIR's evolution, and recount how the institution works at its three stages of service provision: planning, building, and serving as a landlord. Nevertheless, no account of the institution can be truly exhaustive. Recognizing this, I conclude with three main points. Continued research on MEVIR by myself or by other scholars can take a number of directions, especially ones addressing the institution's shortcomings. MEVIR is a fundamentally geographical matter, and so too is this thesis, one designed to inform readers about both a housing program and the places where this program works. While the historical-geographical specificity of MEVIR inhibits replicating it with exactitude abroad, the organization does offer a series of general lessons about housing, infrastructure, rural development, and the longevity of institutions.

Subsequent Research and MEVIR's Shortcomings

My reading of MEVIR is highly enthusiastic. It flows from the premise that MEVIR as a force for good, one I have arrived at mostly on account of qualitative observations. These observations are, chiefly, the emotions of participants across differences in place and the support of the state across differences in administrations. Whenever MEVIR announces a plan in a town, when it cuts the ribbon for a new plan, and when it transfers the deeds to homes, these are the three bookend moments of the organization's work. These three moments are marked by mass outpourings of joy and a sense of achievement. They are shared intimately between participants, technicians, and public officials. For participant families, selection by MEVIR, moving into one of its homes, and the fact of becoming an owner, are often the moments of greatest jubilation in

their lives. MEVIR's power to improve lives, and its track record at accomplishing this, are lost neither on the institution's technicians, nor on many branches of the Uruguayan state.

Intendencias, ministries, and state entities want to be on MEVIR's team, because they know it will help them. This vision of MEVIR is unsurprisingly promoted by high-ranking officials in speeches at public events like the Expo Prado. But it also characterizes the opinions expressed to me by many informants across the length and breadth of Uruguay.

The tenor and content of this manuscript also results from the welcoming manner in which MEVIR has received me. This is not to imply that I have refrained from being critical in order to avoid offending people who have treated me well. That is far from the truth. My experience with MEVIR has been a positive one. This is in part because many of the organization's employees have expressed their desire to see how as a rare outsider, I make sense of the institution. And they show interest, moreover, in how my observations might lead to improvements within MEVIR. All those people linked with MEVIR itself are not the primary audience of this thesis, especially before the work sees a Spanish translation. Addressing the curiosity and interest of my interlocutors within MEVIR has been one motivating factor in my decisions to write the manuscript in its current form.

Nonetheless, an optimistic vision of MEVIR does not excuse the institution's shortcomings from more thorough scrutiny. Such examinations must go beyond two oft-repeated ideological critiques. The first of these is that MEVIR was a reactionary program designed to concentrate labor in a way that helped owners of large-scale ranches continue to dominate the means of production. A related point is that MEVIR is a top-down organization, one which inhibits the agency of its target population. Founded at a time of great economic uncertainty in Uruguay, MEVIR was a mutually beneficial risk sharing proposition, if anything. Ranchers

retained workers who may otherwise have been more prone to move to cities, and workers gained security and an improved quality of life. MEVIR is not an “either or” proposition, but rather a “both and” initiative. Any implication that MEVIR is an inferior housing solution to programs emanating from differing political traditions belittles the material and emotional benefits to thousands of families, and it obfuscates Gallinal’s deepest motivation for founding the program. Gallinal held a fervent conviction, grounded in Catholic social welfare doctrines, to help fellow humans in need. Ideological critiques are additionally out of touch with how MEVIR has continuously re-interpreted the changing economy and landscape of rural Uruguay. Gallinal’s initiative is still routinely invoked at MEVIR events, and rightly so. But the MEVIR of today addresses a much more varied and complex reality of rural life than was present in the mid-twentieth century. As multiple MEVIR employees have informed me, if the institution decided to continue providing services exactly the way it had during Gallinal’s lifetime, it would long since have ceased to exist.

In any effort to help the institution keep fulfilling its goal of improving habitat for the poor in rural areas, future research would do well to ask, *which practices must MEVIR preserve and which must it discard?* I have written this study as a geographer and not as a management consultant. Nonetheless, the time I have spent with MEVIR employees leads me to believe that a thorough audit of the office, not unlike that conducted by Ares and Pini in 1987, would be a constructive activity, especially if the subsequent findings were read with a healthy dose of humility. There are inefficiencies in how talent is allocated at the office, a phenomenon not unique to any one administration or to any one sector. This is an area in which a harkening back to the austerity, long-term thinking, and can-do attitude of Gallinal’s day (a time, for example, when board members were not reimbursed for their expenses), can provide guidance. I will

tentatively offer three suggestions for how MEVIR can re-envision its office as a more dynamic, united, and productive workplace.

When MEVIR looks at hiring new employees, it conceives of labor markets in exclusively Uruguayan terms. In a country of only 3.5 million people, this is an oversight. MEVIR as an Uruguayan law means the organization cannot build homes in the territories of other countries. However, these juridical limits do not preclude MEVIR from hiring foreigners, whose contribution would add to the organization's human capital. Montevideo is an attractive place to live, and MEVIR offers generous salaries, a healthy work-life balance, and a mission-driven nature. MEVIR is missing opportunities by not pursuing non-Uruguayans to fill positions, especially jobs that ask for more strategic thinking. Channeling José Gervasio Artigas's vision of a Federal League, such a broadening of horizons could include, though not be limited to, high-skilled Argentines fleeing instability across the estuary.

In the much larger MEVIR office of the present, it is more expensive for this organization to cover the cost of its employees traveling to inaugurations, especially those occurring at greater distances from Montevideo. The days Alejandro Sandobal recounts of soccer games between MEVIR office staff and townsfolk are long gone. Apart from a handful of specific employees, such as the surveyors and the workplace safety manager, most people in the office rarely witness MEVIR's work first-hand. The MEVIR administration only invites employees to select inaugurations, and when they do this, attendance is optional. As a result, there is a greater disconnection between the office and the obra. This division threatens to erode the motivations of employees and their commitment to the organization's mission. Making attendance at inaugurations more commonplace is an action worth considering. Moreover, such efforts at bringing office employees out of the city and into the places where MEVIR intervenes need not

be limited to the institution's bookend moments. The sense of occasion of an inauguration or a deed signing has immense value at making sense of what MEVIR accomplishes. But so too does a visit to a random day in the life of an obra, where office employees are more likely to see the emotional challenges of mutual aid and the complex logistics of a multi-sited operation.

Connecting office workers to the obra is one priority. A further step in cementing MEVIR's sense of mission (returning to the oft-used soccer analogy, *poner la camiseta*) is to connect office workers to each other, encouraging more cross-sector interaction. There are two main impediments to this. The first is architectural, while the second is cultural. The layout of MEVIR's headquarters, situated on seven floors that are not particularly wide, is not the most conducive to prolonged social interaction or to coming in close proximity with colleagues who do not work in anybody's immediate vicinity. As was made clear to me in a cramped year-end toast in December 2023, MEVIR's two meeting rooms, the Sala Gallinal and Sala Mieres, are too small to accommodate comfortably the majority of the office employees. Each sector contains its own kitchenette (sink, refrigerator, and microwave), but there is no MEVIR-wide canteen, let alone any communal social space. On the subject of dining, it is relevant that Uruguay does not have a robust tradition of office employees sharing lunch together, let alone taking their time to do so. There is also not a standard lunch hour. MEVIR is typical of white-collar offices in Uruguay, where people order in their food or heat up their lunch at a time that suits them during the flow of their workday. Given the lack of dining space, MEVIR employees usually eat at their desks. These customs are more similar to the United States or to the United Kingdom than they are to Brazil, France, or Spain. While stopping short of imposing the cultural norms of other countries and advocating for an expensive remodeling of the office space, I do encourage MEVIR to brainstorm ways that incite more cross-pollination of ideas and reduce

cliquishness. A simple measure is one of introducing new employees to all the existing employees in the office, something that Teresa Sangiovanni mentions was extremely helpful to her when she joined in 1989.

There is ample room for more thorough scrutiny of MEVIR at the post-construction stage. MEVIR is clearly successful in a qualitative sense (measured by giving people what they want), but a more systematic study of outcomes (measured in default, abandonment, and comparing the trajectories of families with and without MEVIR homes) will make the organization even more effective at carrying out its mission. Chapter Five on MEVIR's post-obra work focused less on the outcomes of individual participant families or plans as a whole, and more on how the institution goes about acting as a landlord. Future analyses can use quantitative methods, looking, for example, at the extent to which moving into a MEVIR home correlates with rising incomes and other indicators of well-being. In other words, how much and in what ways does MEVIR actually increase people's opportunities beyond simply boosting quality of domestic life and attachment to place?

A deeper qualitative examination of a set of plans and localities with different circumstances will also help to attain a clearer understanding of MEVIR's impact and the ways the institution can maximize that impact. MEVIR keeps data on the number of families who abandon homes or who are in arrears, but it has not yet arrived, to my knowledge, at a more precise understanding of the causes of these issues and how they vary across place and time. Such an inquiry can help to identify the common characteristics of the families who struggle the most to fulfill MEVIR's hopes and expectations, including in such thematic areas as making payments, taking care of homes, remaining in homes, and being good neighbors. This research

can also reveal solutions for how to better help these more vulnerable and unfortunate families navigate the path to homeownership.

The systematic gathering of information about outcomes, beyond a scattered collection of anecdotes and raw numbers on arrears and abandonment, will help MEVIR better allocate its resources for families at the selection, obra, and tenant stages. And it will refine the institution's decisions not just for whom to build, but also where to build. Nonetheless, there are valid arguments to be made that MEVIR should still build for a family even when it has low confidence that such a family will be able to carry out the *superación* (personal betterment and overcoming of obstacles through hard work) that is so strongly emphasized at assemblies during the obra. As MEVIR is a social policy, one where a feel-good factor figures prominently, there is a grey area and some subjectivity in what constitutes return on investment. This debate is not going away. The vigor of this discussion, and the intellectual centrality of it within the institution will if anything keep MEVIR running.

Over the course of my research, this study became less about understanding MEVIR as a housing solution and more about understanding how it works as a unique institution. This manuscript has been narrowly focused on Uruguay and on one particular case of a housing program. There remains a need to put MEVIR into two academic conversations. The first of these is with respect to housing across Uruguay, especially cooperatives and urban initiatives. A second, and more important theme, is that work on MEVIR needs to speak to the international literature in housing studies. MEVIR is explicit about working only in rural areas, extending across a national scale, employing mutual aid, and providing a path to property ownership. I am as yet unaware of any programs in other countries which hold the same mission for achieving these four things.

MEVIR and Geography

MEVIR is a geographical exercise. Across the scales through which it mediates, from the house to the nation, MEVIR consciously takes place and makes place. Its technicians are not trained as geographers, yet they exhibit an extraordinary tacit knowledge of place and a recognition that the institution has a profound geographical component. Awareness of geography is indispensable for MEVIR employees, and especially field technicians, to do their job well. As the social worker Teresa Sangiovanni reflects, “the map is like my notebook. We [at MEVIR] all connect through the map. Knowing where places are is as fundamental as knowing how to type”.⁵⁹⁵

From Gallinal’s accumulated knowledge of rural Uruguay, something he acquired through countless trips across the country when visiting political, ranching, and religious colleagues, to the methodical department-by-department territorial investigations conducted by multidisciplinary teams in the 2010s, MEVIR has exhibited a desire and ability to conform to place. As rurality (a category with social, cultural, economic, and political elements) has shifted, MEVIR has responded to this. Its attention to geographic knowledge transcends far beyond the memorization of far-flung hamlets on the map. MEVIR leverages both formal and informal understandings of the particularities of rural Uruguay as a whole and of the many distinct parts within it. Geographic knowledge has been essential to MEVIR’s continued success and to maintaining its *modus operandi* that no two interventions are the same. Instead, they become customized based on the needs of a given place at a particular time.

⁵⁹⁵ Interview with Teresa Sangiovanni, 20 June 2022.

Conversely, MEVIR has been a key actor in the transformation of Uruguay's human geography for now more than a half-century. Its understanding of the above scales, and its respect for them, allows MEVIR homes to be a harmonious and respected intervention into territory. More than any act of territorializing since the arrival of the railways, MEVIR has marked a before and after in the Uruguayan interior. Unlike the railways, which were built by foreign capital and with mainly economic aims, MEVIR is foremost a social and a national project.

This study of MEVIR is also a geographical exercise. *More Than a Home* is rooted in the conviction that observing a cultural landscape, interrogating it over time and through the people who build it, bears rich intellectual fruit. MEVIR, more than most institutions, brings the component parts of a place together. This is also what my narrative has set out to achieve, harnessing the power of geography as an integrative discipline, one that binds phenomena, place, people, and time. Taking MEVIR as an object of inquiry also serves to teach Uruguayan geography. On account of the institution's geographical breadth and the ethnographical richness of *jornadas* with its technicians, analyzing MEVIR yields a detailed understanding of where places are, what they mean, how they fit together, and why they matter.

The main text of this thesis is about how MEVIR operates. But there is also a significant subtext, one that informs the reader about the particularities of where the organization works. This geographical reading as I traveled across the country is evident in many of the footnotes and in the prominence of details explaining themes including food, music, sports, botany and zoology, education, language, transportation, and migration. MEVIR is a powerful conduit for piquing a reader's interest in Uruguay. Moreover, a geographical reading of MEVIR has general implications beyond the particulars of the institution and its country. It also illustrates the

importance of place in understanding the dialectic categories that drive much of social scientific and humanistic inquiry, especially urban and rural, wealth and poverty, public and private, and domestic and foreign.

Lessons Beyond MEVIR

This last category brings me to the final points I wish to make. MEVIR may be an exclusively Uruguayan program, but I would be far less inclined to write about it if I found it irrelevant to the rest of the world. Given MEVIR's continuity and stability, it is intuitive to inquire where the institution might look to expand outside of Uruguay. The problem with government policies, laws, and public entities, however, is that they can only be applied within the country to which they pertain. It would thus be more realistic to ask questions about where in the world beyond Uruguay would be best suited to implementing a MEVIR-like program and how might MEVIR technicians assist such an undertaking?

For reasons of place specificity, any attempts toward a close replica of MEVIR are likely a futile exercise. The operative question is not whether MEVIR can be copied but rather what combination of its features are transferrable in any given place. It requires a geographic perspective to understand the extent to which MEVIR's vision and methodology are applicable elsewhere. The success of the solution depends on the place. There is a confluence of conditions and actions that have made it possible for MEVIR to thrive. Among these realities are a democracy that shares power between parties and mediates interests across classes, an earlier lack of market and state provision of a service (well-built and dignified housing) in a specific geographical context, access to land at a suitable scale and cost, and a middle-income country with relative ethnic uniformity. These factors which have aligned in Uruguay do not prohibit

other countries or sub-national polities from following MEVIR's lead in attempting to build housing for people of modest means in rural areas using mutual aid construction and providing a path to property ownership. Any MEVIR-inspired program will work best where it fills a niche, identifying and addressing social problems with a high degree of precision beyond a general urge to alleviate a "housing crisis".

All of this conjecture, however, implies that transferring MEVIR centers on building homes. As much as it is tempting to applaud the creation of spinoffs in other countries, especially in ones that share key traits with Uruguay (agrarian, middle-income, small-to-medium scale), reducing MEVIR to a housing solution sells the organization's transformative capacities short. More than serving as a housing provider, MEVIR has always been a holistic effort at making a place viable. Alberto Gallinal was not a housing activist. He was a polymath. He looked around his town and his country, then pinpointed problems which needed to be solved. It just so happened that in his milieu, at the time during which he had the greatest wherewithal to act, the most pressing issue was housing. MEVIR was a solution (albeit an incomplete one) to a broader social problem. And that solution coincidentally centered on housing.

Speculation about where the idea of MEVIR might travel also fails to address the question of which parts of the idea will diffuse the best. The specifics will depend on the place, for example in determining whether to retain a rural focus, or figuring out the degree to which mutual aid will be effective. Regardless of location, what *can* travel with MEVIR are a set of general principles that are evident throughout the organization's history and across the three stages of its operations.

MEVIR is a mission-driven organization that has always been driven by a qualitative sense of human betterment. Gallinal was not interested in metrics beyond the general principles

of eradicating *rancheríos* and of growing the organization to a national scale. MEVIR did not arise from technocrats sitting in their offices. It emanates instead from accumulated field experience and a deep passion for the places the program would go on to serve.

MEVIR is small-scale and incremental in its growth yet is still relentless across place and time. Between the planning, building and landlord stages, MEVIR is always active in many localities.

Expanding upon the humanistic geographers I cited in the Introduction, MEVIR not only capitalizes on and promotes place attachment. It also places immense value on building intimacy, both between different recipients and between these recipients and the provider of their service. A belief in the effectiveness of professionally supervised mutual aid sustains MEVIR's humanist geographical vision.

MEVIR may control the choice of where to build, but it does so based on careful calculations of need, and of fairness, another humanistic value. It may have a highly hierarchical structure, but it makes decisions in dialogue with local communities.

Alberto Gallinal's vision and determination demonstrate that key individuals can matter to the long-term health of institutions. This was true in MEVIR's early years, but it also matters today. The contemporary MEVIR may bear little resemblance to the one that Gallinal envisioned. But the continued prominence of Gallinal as a unifying figure helps to make the organization more legible to the public and this provides a narrative to strengthen internal institutional coherence.

If a pilot project works, it is best to continue funding it. Good ideas too often die once political credit has been taken or economic spoils have been shared. MEVIR was never a vanity project. Gallinal conceived of it as an entity to long outlast his own life.

Finally, as the title of this thesis suggests, good housing accounts for more than just homes. Housing is a holistic good, one whose success depends on understanding the needs of the people residing in the homes. Success also means facilitating a symbiotic relationship between individual homes and a broader community at larger scales. In MEVIR's specific case, this concerns the neighborhood, town, and nation, especially.

These lessons may be more applicable in some contexts than others. For example, they may apply more in countries with key similarities to Uruguay and in quasi-governmental organizations as opposed to other types of bodies. They may also be more amenable to housing as opposed to other types of infrastructure. People tend to hold more of an emotional, financial, and political stake in their homes than they hold in other parts of the built environment, on account of their homes being where they spend the most time and providing those spaces which are the most personal to them. Nonetheless, MEVIR's lessons are general ones.

Housing need, whether qualitative or quantitative, rural or urban, permanent or temporary, remains an issue in Uruguay and abroad. At San Pedro de Timote, Gallinal's ranch, there are Spanish-style tiles placed on the walls of an exterior patio that depict phrases favored by MEVIR's founder. One of them is especially apt when thinking about MEVIR's future and its possible influence abroad. "*Nos queda aún mucho por hacer.*" (We still have much left to do).



Figure 35: Motivational inscriptions like this one line the exterior walls of San Pedro de Timote, Alberto Gallinal's estancia in Florida Department (photo by author, 1 July 2022).

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