

SHARED PROCESSES IN THE PRODUCTION OF THE SPACE IF POOR PEOPLE MATTERS

Denise Morado Nascimento, Marcela S. B. Lopes, Junia M. F. de Lima, André C. B. Soares, Carolina A. Boaventura, Cecília R. A. dos Santos, Paulinisia de C. Braga, Bianca de C. C. Ribeiro

Abstract

The article aims to share experiences due to the research project DIALOGUES, which has the major goal of setting strategies for communicative, reciprocal and desired dialogue among architects and dwellers. The research aims to (1) deconstruct hierarchies between scientific or encoded knowledge, proper of the academy, and the practical knowledge of the residents, inserted into their daily lives; (2) share information relevant to housing among all in order to support better decision-making processes; (3) preserve trial, opinion and experience of residents, ensuring the prevalence of their own decisions; (4) promote the exercise of communicative skills of those involved and the autonomy in decision-making processes. We present the community Irmã Dorothy as our exercise of Dialogues; an area of approximately 10,000 m², located in Belo Horizonte, with 75 families earning up to three minimum wages (89,4% of the Brazilian housing deficit is represent by families with incomes up to 3 minimum wages - around US\$ 980,00/month).

Keywords

Urban occupations, housing, mediation of information.

INTRODUCTION

DIALOGUES is a research project, which understands housing as a process of living and not as product. The article begins by the theoretical debate about ‘right to housing’ in Brazil, referring to the historical conditions faced by the poor people to access adequate housing and urban services. Briefly, the paper discusses the main instruments established by the Federal Constitution and the *Estatuto da Cidade* (City Statute). Then we explicit the universe of Brazilian irregular occupations of land for housing and the popular struggles for answering their demands; we take the city of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, as an example. Following, we place the housing productive processes within the universe of users who individually take their decisions on these processes. And from there, the patterns of mediation as a social practice, meaning real advances to society.

RIGHT TO HOUSING IN BRAZIL

Until the early 1980's, the centralized making-decisions processes at the federal level characterized the public policies promoted by the Brazilian government, whereas the states and municipalities were executors of such policies. The reform of the State was driven by the country's democratization process, consolidated in the 1988 Constitution.

The right to housing is explicitly incorporated there through the Constitutional Amendment 26, Article 6, 2000. It stipulates that education, health, labor, housing, leisure, safety, welfare, protection of motherhood and childhood, and assistance to the destitute are social rights. Social rights are associated with a set of economic, social and cultural conditions, which are taken as an assumption of fundamental rights. So there is no doubt that the basis of housing rights is constitutional (Canuto 2010, p.171).

It doesn't mean that the state or municipality is required to provide housing for every citizen. The Government should institute guidelines for city development that include housing, sanitation and urban transport. The legal means to protect the possession and ownership of housing should be available to anyone, as it should be prohibited to prevent anyone from conquering his/her house. Furthermore the rights and guarantees expressed in the Constitution don't exclude principles aroused from international covenants internalized by Brazil.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNITED NATIONS 1948)

Article 25 (1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (OHCHR/UN 1966)

Article 11 (1) The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right, recognizing to this effect the essential importance of international co-operation based on free consent.

Vancouver Declaration on Human Settlements (UNHABITAT 1976)

The needs for shelter, infrastructure and services are nearly always greater than the capacity of public authorities to provide them. That is why, throughout the world but especially in the developing countries, people have traditionally provided housing and rudimentary services for themselves and will continue to do so in the future.

Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements (UNHABITAT 1999)

We reaffirm our commitment to the full and progressive realization of the right to adequate housing as provided for in international instruments. To that end, we shall seek the active participation of our public, private and non-governmental partners at all levels to ensure legal security of tenure, protection from discrimination and equal access to affordable, adequate housing for all persons and their families.

Global Report on Human Settlements, New York (UNITED NATIONS 2001)

The challenge is to develop enabling strategies that are not narrowly restricted to the economic functioning of markets, but that also include support for the exercise of citizenship – of ‘the rights to the city’, including the realization of housing rights.

In order to meet the specified above, but essentially to combat social inequality and to make urban spaces more human, expanding the population's access to housing, sanitation and transport, the *Ministério das Cidades* was created in 2003 by the Brazilian Federal Government. Through the *Caixa Econômica Federal*, the financial resources' operator, the Ministry shall work in coordination and partnership with states and municipalities but also with social movements, NGOs, private sector and other segments of society.

At the same time, legal instruments were created in order to guarantee that the international treaties and the fundamental rights would be extended to all Brazilian citizens. One of the main instruments so far is the *Estatuto da Cidade*, which reflects the intention of promoting the development of economic activities allied with quality of life and social justice, emphasizing the right to housing. It is a legal instrument, which aims to enforce and regulate the implementation of urban public policies.

Another important debate is the one about the *National Policy for Prevention and Mediation of Urban Land Conflicts*, promoted by the *Conselho das Cidades* (Cities Council). Such policy is based in two assumptions. First, the human right to adequate housing is fundamental component for fulfilling the social function of urban property and of the city. Second, urban land conflicts are characterized by the collective dispute in the possession or ownership of urban property. Thus, involves low-income families who demand the protection of the State in ensuring their human right to housing and to the city.

However, the gap between what is regulated by the treaties and policies and what is really applied indicates the complexity of the issue, which has much more to do with the imposition of economic interests than the legal parameters. The mere existence of agreements and laws has proved insufficient in a negotiation process among housing associations, social movements, landowners and public agencies, primarily with regard to urban land access. Prejudice and discrimination against the poor and their way of living, along with the annihilation of their interests, hide the reasons for the failure of urban policies. Political and social mobilization, still not present in the Brazilian public institutions and society, seems to be urgent if the execution of egalitarian urban policies is desired.

HOUSING CONTEXT IN BELO HORIZONTE, BRAZIL

“The right to adequate housing should not be interpreted narrowly. Rather, it should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity” (UNHABITAT 2009).

Belo Horizonte has been seen as a ‘good’ example of a huge typical Brazilian city from the mid-twenty century, even with the diversity of its problems and challenges

(Caldas, Mendonça & Carmo, 2008). Following the urban principles from the new republican order and functioning as the political and administrative center of the State of Minas Gerais, the new capital named Belo Horizonte was inaugurated in 1897. Throughout its history, Belo Horizonte has not changed its exclusionary urban production logic. On the contrary, the city has established a prevalence of central-peripheral pattern, with a clear predominance of elites in the central areas and of growing low income population in the periphery. The Construction Commission didn't provide in their original plans, area for the working population, which was "distributed" in the suburban zone and agricultural villages with any urban services and social equipments, starting a historical process of socio-territorial segregation. Beyond that, the solution to the housing deficit given by the public power in Belo Horizonte still favors the construction of buildings in the periphery.

Since its inauguration, Belo Horizonte's production has been specialized in services and commerce, along the mechanical-mineral-metal tripod of activities based on exportation. A third sector is also presented, but because of the underdeveloped urbanization process of the city, it absorbs an expressive low qualified and/or informal activities aligned with low payment and aggregated value.

The high cost of the land has raised development barriers for certain sectors, specially the industry and the social housing. Due to the above, it can be easily recognized the high concentration of commerce and services activities from the center of the city (able to generate capital and to concentrate people) to its periphery, through the major avenues towards neighborhoods characterized by precarious social, physical and economic conditions.

MEDIATION OF INFORMATION: WHAT IS THIS?

The capitalist mode of producing urban space is associated with the real state market and supported by the legislation on the use and occupation of land. On the one hand, the privilege embodied by formal urban structures and, on the other, the poverty manifested in informal settlements (the autoconstruction).

Formal production shelters the scientific knowledge, legitimated by the academy, while autoconstruction is structured by the practical knowledge, experimented along time by the residents/builders. Usually accompanied by illegality or informality, the autoconstruction represents 77% of the Brazilian housing production (Abramat 2005). Due to all these, creative and dynamic approaches seem to be necessary if academy, essentially the architectural field, aims to face the historically built distance between architects and poor people.

The *mediation of information* process intends to be a possibility to include students and professors into the social housing reality through a consistent and critical action towards the housing processes. It consists in the establishment of a social place in which residents can associate their practical and experimental knowledge to the technical one, which comes from architectural students and professors. In this sense, mediation of information is a process structured for families with incomes up to 3 minimum wages who demonstrate desire and commitment to its essential premise:

work together. On the horizon of the proposal is the real and unrestricted possibility for residents to autonomously decide about their houses.

The mediation of information embraces:

- An encounter place where people together search information and knowledge;
- A communicative, reciprocal and desired process;
- The deconstruction of the existent hierarchies between the codified or scientific knowledge from the academy and the practical knowledge from the residents, inserted into their daily lives;
- Transference and communication of information about the housing universe (production and use), which will feed a better making-decision process;
- The preservation of judgment, opinion and experience from the residents, regarding their prevalence on their own decision;
- The understanding of housing as a process and not a product;
- The promotion of the communicative capacity and of the autonomy of all the involved.

As a form to enable the dialog, mediation of information also demands the use of non-traditional methodologies and languages, which have nothing to do with the platform of technical information (the architectural drawings - plans, sections, facades). The search for *informational means* that can be understood by all involved is an important part of the process.

IRMÃ DOROTHY COMMUNITY

Since June 2010, we have been working with the families from *Irmã Dorothy* Community, an urban occupation located in the sectional Barreiro, Belo Horizonte.

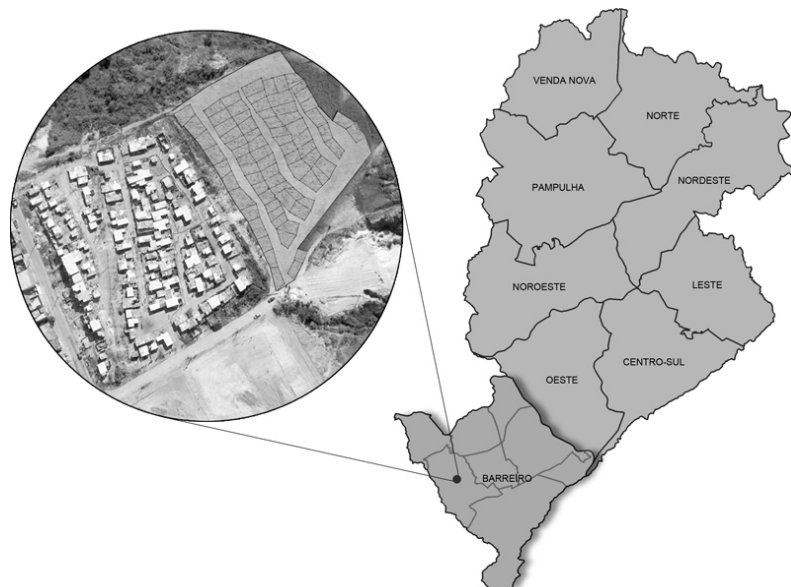


Figure 1: Irmã Dorothy Community located in the sectional Barreiro

It is a plot of about 10 thousands square meters in which are living, since March 2010, approximately 75 families with incomes up to three Brazilian minimum wages. The plot is part of an area composed of three different urban occupations: *Camilo Torres*, *Irmã Dorothy 1* and *Irmã Dorothy 2* (which happens to be an expansion of the first one).



Figure 2: *Irmã Dorothy Community View*

The occupation plot belonged to the public power, *Companhia de Desenvolvimento de Minas Gerais* (Development Company of Minas Gerais), who donated the land to a private company in order to create an industrial plant along twenty months. This company, however, did not fulfill the agreement and, five months later, it illegally sold the land to another private developer. Even with the successive transfers to private companies, the property was abandoned as a solid waste disposal area for more than ten years.

In 2010, aware of the conflict, families have occupied the land and named the area *Irmã Dorothy* (a tribute to the murdered Sister Dorothy). The families occupied the area along three parallel streets, which received the 60 square meters standardized lots. The residents themselves inaccurately defined the limits in order to fast expedite the construction phase. The lots' occupation did not follow a pattern: some have occupied a large part of the lot, while others have chosen to build just a small room. The left spaces, either in the front or in the back of the lot, are used as a yard to raise chickens, to cultivate vegetables or to dry clothes.

After the occupation, the supposed landowner registered a housing project to be financed by *Caixa Econômica Federal*. Since then, not only *Irmã Dorothy 1* and *2* but also *Camilo Torres* have been facing forced eviction threats; the Warrant of Possession Reintegration has already been consigned. The communities, along with Brazilian Prosecutors, are pressuring the municipality and the State of Minas Gerais, to urgently take measures to protect them, reverting those areas into public property and suspending the warrant. Despite the *National Policy for Prevention and Mediation of*

Urban Land Conflicts, the 1988 Constitution and the *Estatuto da Cidade*, along the international treaties, which all establish and guarantee the right to adequate housing and the social function of property, the warrant is still valid.

The mediation of information process

At the first meeting, we introduced ourselves as potential partners who would work closely together in order to minimize their housing problems. However, we also warned them that we were not able to make any financial contribution and, furthermore, we would not play the role of the State or even the role of "saviors", as someone who knows everything and solves all the problems. Our clear and stated intention was to set a social 'place' in which we would be able to share experiences and information about building/renovation their homes, and the urban area as a whole. The process, named Dialogues, would be essentially based on the mutual commitment to the process - the formation of a third knowledge that would be resulted from both the practical knowledge (the residents) and the technical knowledge (the academy).

Undeniably we all agreed that our partnership should improve the political image of the occupation in opposition to the mistaken understanding of what is an urban occupation, generally seen as a place invaded by squatters and unemployed people. Perhaps, the Dialogues' researchers presence shall help the residents in the legal process regarding the housing rights.

The most majority of the residents were enthusiastic and willing to participate. The common issue to be worked by all was stated: "we need to clean the houses", meaning that the sewage and drainage systems were common priorities. A resident gave a powerful and emotional speech, claiming everybody to work together since it was a serious matter concerning everyone's health: "my grandson had almost lost his foot due to an infection caused by the inappropriate destination of sewage and garbage." Moreover, a 'clean' occupation could be a positive factor through the eyes of the neighborhood and the public power.

The next step was to investigate how we could together answer this demand, trying to access the legal sewage system of the city. A non-conventional sewage system was also suggested, but later discarded because of its high costs of implementation and maintenance. The residents collectively decided by the construction of condominium sewage system, which was easier and cheaper to implement. We developed models and manuals to show to the residents how it should be executed. The residents participated during all the collective meetings, especially the construction workers who questioned about the pipes dimensions or suggested cheaper ways to execute the connections.

The process described above shows how the sewage system was collectively conceived and built. However, despite the transparent and collective process, some questions were driven: why the dwellers were not massively present in the execution day of the first sewage fragment? Why the building materials were not available at that moment? Why the collective decisions were not respected during the construction of the next sewage fragment?

FIRST DEBATE

Let's try to answer the previous questions using a statement from a leader: "they are not yet a community; but if anyone says something bad about the community, they put themselves together to fight against her/him".

When criticism and disapproval, which may come from the neighborhood and the authorities as external pressure (for example, a possibility of expulsion from their territory), are present, the residents get together. The people living in *Irmã Dorothy* have no previous social bond, except for two or three families; but if a threat of expulsion is suddenly faced, the sense of community emerges in defense of the land. The sense of community is continuously confronted by the real condition of urban and social exclusion.

Other examples have shown us that when a specific problem is solved, the group ceases to work as a community, at least for some time, and keeps waiting for a sequential fact, which would provoke the community reconfiguration again. For each new circumstance, it might happen a new mobilization process and a new configuration of the group.

Not only problems catalyze the reconfiguration process. The festivals and rituals also play this role. One resident told us, for example, that at a particular moment, a priest was called for a celebration with the clear intention of "bringing people together." Another example occurred at the end of 2010, when a group of residents decided to create and to feed a pig - named by them as "Christmas" - to ensure a good and an abundant party in the end of the year.

The urban occupants are not *a priori* communities; actually, the mobilization process constantly changes. In the case of parties or rituals, the families come together because of their social identification. On the contrary, when some kind of urgent problem is faced, the mobilization process occurs within a political arena. Thus, the communities are autonomously formed and consolidated sometimes as a reactive game, sometimes as a collective game. This continuous, but non-linear process could be the basis for the gradual establishment of a "sense of belonging" among the residents.

Given this, we can affirm that the contribution of our work for the residents can be seen beyond a simple technical information sharing. We dare to say that the sewage problem and the search for a solution also worked as a catalyst factor, perhaps contributing to the future social and political mobilizations around other issues, with involvement of more residents.

In a posterior mediation round, for the execution of another sewage fragment, we noticed that the technical information has been used and contributed to the formation of a shared knowledge. The collective decisions initially were not respected but, later on, we testified that the sewage system is being built at the end based on shared information. Besides, most of the residents declared they have been somehow transformed after the mediation process: "two minds think better than only one". The same occurred to the researchers.

SECOND DEBATE

Until the eighteenth century, the "design" (from the Italian *disegno*) was the only instrument to involve the three dimensions of *ideazione* (= previous intellectual exercise), the *graphic representation* (= the reasoning embodied in the paper) and *intention* (the viability of any purpose, not only the architectural one). Design was the mediator between the knowledge of reality and the action upon reality, meaning the reflection on the performance of the whole (Bueno 2000).

The word design (as "project") started to assume the role of planning work, from the moment that the codes and conventions in its construction were adopted. Thus, from the emergence of the project, the architectural profession institutionalization, the formalization of architectural education and the distance between the studio (art) and the work site (technical) were crystallized. We have, then, from the eighteenth century, the design to conceive (think the planning) and the project to demonstrate (represent the planning).

Such architectural 'logic' cannot be applied to an urban occupation since the identification of a problem and the implementation of a solution occur at the same time. This means that any attempt at planning is discarded since another factors, and not the project, define the production processes, which are: (1) social mobilization capacity around a particular issue, (2) financial and physical ability of those involved.

The logic of planning, which means how the architecture field has been historically working, doesn't structure the practice of the architects who are interested in working together with low-income families. Due to this, the researchers in the *Irmã Dorothy* have been worked on the application of non-traditional methodologies to promote efficient, meaningful and shared processes – manuals, booklets, models and collective discussions.

THIRD DEBATE

Paulo Freire (2007) draws attention to a possible construction of an ideal transformation of the oppressed, which is associated to the role of his/her oppressor. Freire characterizes this condition as the "immersion" of all in a specific reality, which would adhere the oppressed to the values of his/her oppressor.

A sentence of one resident illustrates such adherence: "most of all, I wanted to win the lottery and be out of here." We can even infer that adherence previously takes place when we realize the spatial configuration of the area: private plots with well-defined limits without open spaces, reinforcing the formal logic that excludes and oppresses the urban poor. When we proposed the construction of common bathrooms and laundry facilities, which would minimize the sewage situation at lower cost and greater speed, the residents showed no interest.

In this sense, we believe that the role of the political leaders throughout the community mobilization process is very important. In *Irmã Dorothy* there are strong and representative leaders, all women hardly working in favor of the community. However, a much more organized and coordinated leadership should be able to aggregate residents in order to politically mature them, giving them the opportunity to discard

ambiguous references of ascension (the adherence of Freire), intensively based on the cruel and perverse capitalism logic.

Within this context, the way we introduce ourselves to an urban occupation's residents can also define the nature of a partnership. Paradoxically, the greatest capitalist statement "supply creates demand" can guide an effective partnership. Our research group – Praxis – has been contributing, through the mediation of information practice, to the deconstruction of a discourse adhered to the already known oppressive values but not necessarily the best options to be used in a singular reality. To build and to renovate houses can be set as actions and interactions' places of discussion, exchange, sharing and dialogue.

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