Conflicting urban models and practices: recent housing movements in the revitalization of downtown São Paulo

Vera M. Pallamin
Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil

Zeuler Lima
Washington University in Saint Louis, USA

This paper focuses on the conflict between urban models of redevelopment and the practice of housing movements in downtown São Paulo since the 1980s. This period represents the intensification in the practice of socio-spatial segregation, in which new political agents and movements have redefined the struggle over the access to spaces in the metropolis, in particular collective spaces and social housing in the historic center of the city.

Our argumentation is based on two simultaneous approaches. On the one hand, the relationship between city and citizenship has to be reviewed according to the transformation in the traditional role of nation-states and cities in the definition of rights of belonging. On the other hand, the exercise of politics of difference must foster the revision of democratic participation, through the dialogic practice of dissent, which opens up a possibility to further problematize difference in the production of urban spaces.

Urban spaces are intimately related to the exercise of democracy, the claim for the political recognition of otherness, and to the redefinition of the role of citizenship in contemporary western societies. Cities, therefore, become the place-bound ground for the exercise of citizenship as opposed to the political and more abstract sphere of the nation state. They represent the place of social practices and the condensation of human and social diversity. This diversity implies the constant dispute over varying forms of social representation by those who struggle for their recognition and visibility in political and urban arenas.

The case of some recent housing projects in São Paulo illustrates how such processes take place through the mobilization of politics that incorporate social groups who have traditionally been silenced and concealed, kept by law mechanisms under the dubious definition of minority or, in some cases, as illegal residents or semi-citizens.
Introduction

The objective of this paper is to expand the understanding of the conflicts between urban models and social practices in the production of the space of contemporary cities, by focusing on the example of political dissent generated by current housing movements in São Paulo, particularly those that affect the historic center of the city.

Urban design and strategic planning appeared in the Northern hemisphere as models for dealing with the problems of urban decentralization and deindustrialization, and the entanglement of the public and private spheres that resulted from the gradual adoption of neo-liberal economic policies since the 1960s. One of the main outcomes of this process was the choice treating the city as a collection of fragments, which can be prioritized for profitable investments. São Paulo is the largest metropolis in Brazil and like other large cities in Latin America it has embraced these models of urban modernization. Claiming a strategic position in the margins of the network of global cities, the city adopted has practices that reinforce spatial inequities in favor of transnational market connectivity.

Brazil has not experienced a similar process of economic and urban transformations of central nations of capitalism. It is still a country with enormous economic and social problems that came out of a long military dictatorship less than 15 years ago, yet the models to deal with its urban reality often come from industrialized countries and deindustrialized cities. The contemporary urban problems of Brazil are different, if not more complicated than in those cities. Brazilians are certainly enjoying a democratic regime and economic stabilization by comparison to previous decades. However, residents of metropolitan areas have to deal with two conflicting realities in their everyday lives. On the one hand, a harsh heritage: population boom and impoverishment caused by internal migrations from the country side into industrial and service areas, a State unable to provide social welfare and urban infrastructure, political and legal corruption, and increasing violence and crime. On the other hand: the internal and external pressures to create conditions for the connection of major Brazilian cities to global market, business and financial networks.

It is important to clarify that neither is globalization a phenomenon with only negative consequences, nor that it is the cause of Brazilian urban problems or even that it has created helpless local conditions. The encounter between local realities and global forces has aggravated some urban problems, but it has also created new conditions in which planners and architects have been able to engage the city, its spaces and its crises in an inventive way. Housing remains one of the central problems of urbanization in Brazil. To investigate alternatives to them looks like a Sisyphean task, but it is also an invitation to understand the changing social, cultural and political facts that frame the reality in which design operates. The main question in this investigation about São Paulo as a global city has been to understand how political dissent - which in Brazil covers a spectrum going from the far left to the far right - has been able to create progressive and not only conservative situations for urban development and architectural practices, particularly from the perspective of housing movements in the historic center of the city.

The housing situation in São Paulo and in large Brazilian cities is certainly complicated, but it still represents an open field for the exploration of alternative policies and practices. In general, alternative actions have not emerge from traditional consensual representations of the public sphere. These practices go along with changes in the way that urban space is produced, but also by possibilities to redefine the public sphere, and the meaning and practice of citizenship. They have been produced in the claim for access to rights to the city by new political subjects under difficult negotiations. This is a political process that unveils the power struggle, forms of spatial inclusions and exclusions, and the unpredictability of actual democratic practice.
Spatial and social and disjunctions in downtown São Paulo

In São Paulo, conflicts over urban spaces have increasingly been related to struggles for what Henri Lefebvre (1991) defined as the right to the city. These practices have become more intense in the last two decades, mostly in conflicts over central areas of the city, which have been under intense pressure of urban revitalization and gentrification. The transformation of the historic center into a hub to attract transnational investments coincides with the recovery of democracy in the country. This change has produced both social and spatial disjunctions. It increased the concentration of private investments and at the same time unveiled repressed forces and new possibilities of political confrontation. Under more democratic administrations, impoverished social groups have gradually started to claim the recognition of their rights of citizenship, by creating and occupying new political and physical spaces in the city.

The metropolitan region of São Paulo is formed by the city of São Paulo itself and 38 other adjacent cities with a population of around 16 million residents occupying an area of more than 900 square kilometers (370 square miles). In the later part of the twentieth century, the historic center of São Paulo suffered the effect of profound transformation in the economic life of the metropolis brought about by decreasing investments in economic activities, urban infrastructure, and social programs. The deep recession of the 1980s that affected the world in general and the country in particular accelerated the impoverishment of the historic downtown as well as other areas of the city. The changes associated with deindustrialization and expansion of business and services have caused great impact in the urban structure and life of the metropolis as well as in the models used to understand its dynamics. For example, the model center-periphery previously used to describe social-spatial inequity in the city has progressively become insufficient to describe the complexity of the spatial distribution of population and social and material resources.

Since the 1980s, the central districts of the São Paulo, which configure what urbanists describe as the “expanded center,” have lost population while urban expansion has happened in peripheral regions. In this period, São Paulo has also witnessed the intensification of urban violence and practices of social isolation and exclusion, constituting public spaces in which inequity is a structural value. As a result, one can clearly see the disjunction between new political opportunities and the increasing dissemination of social and spatial segregation in the city, which produces forms of sociability constantly mediated by fear and controlled by the privatization of collective urban spaces.

In the later part of the twentieth century, the historic center of São Paulo suffered the effect of profound transformation in the economic life of the metropolis brought about by decreasing investments in economic activities, urban infrastructure, and social programs. In this process, middle and upper-class residents, business and banks moved out to other locations in the city, mostly towards the southwestern region. Since the 1980s, according to Andrea Piccini (1999), the downtown area lost 11% of its permanent population, and one estimates that, because of real estate devaluation, the rate of under-occupation and vacancy in the area is around 30%. Growth rates in these areas are considerably high, including controlled areas of environmental protection, which constitute a large problem for the preservation of river sources in the metropolitan region.

Most of the metropolis presents high demand for housing and also a very aggressive pattern of environmental occupation, while it resents the lack of investments in urban development. According to Nabil Bonduki (2001) illegal occupation by squatters has grown up to 223% in some of the metropolitan areas, and, today, around 20% of the people who live in São Paulo live in shantytowns. This is where one finds a striking paradox: urbanized areas of
the city lose population while areas that are not urbanized and don’t have basic infrastructure gain population in the expanding movement of poverty.

Many economic theorists considered the 1980s a “lost decade” in Brazil, because of the deep recession that affected the world in general and the country in particular. This process accelerated the impoverishment of the historic downtown as well as other areas of the city. The last twenty years have represented significant changes in the economic activities associated with deindustrialization and expansion of business and services in São Paulo. These changes have caused great impact in the urban structure and life of the metropolis as well as in the models used to understand its dynamics. For example, the model center-periphery previously used to describe social-spatial inequity in the city has progressively become insufficient to describe the complexity in the spatial distribution of population and social and material resources.

Historically, the production of housing in peripheral areas of the metropolis has taken place outside the formal real estate market relying on patterns such as self-built houses and illegal subdivisions promoted by squatters and mostly by dishonest and criminal developers. However, social movements for housing improvement have achieved significant results since the late 1970s, mostly through their claim for property amnesty, which requires the City administration to recognize the ownership of lots in such subdivisions, and also provides the construction of basic urban infrastructure in deficient neighborhoods.

These movements are a good example of how dissent has played an important political role in São Paulo. The demand for the recognition of land ownership has opened up a serious wound in the country. Land movements in Brazil – both urban and rural – faced for a long time the legacy imposed by the Land Law of 1850, which historically made access to land more difficult to small holders. According to Erminia Maricato this law established a powerful and persistent precedent to keep impoverished rural dwellers and urban squatters from having access to legal rights of land ownership. The continuity of this process of disentitlement by the elites of the country has been in the root of the problems of Brazilian contemporary metropolises with high levels of social and spatial inequity.

Squatters have traditionally had little access to housing, land ownership or political rights until the approval of this new legislation. It was not until very recently that it was finally revised and changed. The approval of a federal law project titled City Statute in July 2001 created a legal instrument, which is still waiting for political decision and action to try to revert a very long history of exclusion from property rights that has left profound gaps in the spatial and social formation of Brazilian cities.

Urban space and citizenship

Urban spaces are intimately related to the exercise of democracy, the claim for the political recognition of otherness, and the redefinition of the role of citizenship in contemporary western societies. The notion and the practices of citizenship defined as a political project are under the increasing pressure of globalization. The current restructuring of capitalism promotes the transformation of spatial boundaries as well as of forms of collective representation and belonging in the city and in the nation state. Traditionally, citizenship was defined as the identity born from the formation of modern nation states. More recently, in a globalized world, the abstract notion of citizenship as nationality has been expanded by the fact that large urban centers have become less dependent on the national sphere, and present a new place for the redefinition of citizenship as related to citizenry.

Cities, therefore, become the place-bound ground for the exercise of citizenship as opposed to the political and more abstract sphere of the nation state. They represent the place of social
practices and the condensation of human and social diversity. This diversity implies the constant dispute over varying forms of social representation by those who struggle for their recognition and visibility in political and urban arenas. The analysis of some recent housing projects in São Paulo illustrates how such processes take place through the mobilization of politics that incorporate social groups who have traditionally been silenced and concealed, kept by law mechanisms under the dubious definition of minorities or, in some cases, as illegal residents or semi-citizens.

The ambivalence between citizenship and nationality is an important element for understanding the relationship between city, its different inhabitants, and its formal and informal models of urbanization. According to anthropologists James Holston and Arjun Appadurai (1999), nationality has established, since the Enlightenment, an important element for the definition of ones membership in society. The need to organize nation states under a uniform system of laws has traditionally defined citizenship as an abstract and universal identity regulating all other possible forms of social belonging. The principle of equality of rights in this definition has excluded other forms of identification and differentiation such as ethnicity, gender, religion, and family relations from the traditional definition of citizenship. The traditional definition of citizenship was part of a project of modernity that intended to weaken the primacy of urban citizenship, and to replace it by the abstract form of national citizenship. However, this latter form has not been able to erase the empirical role of urban life and conflicts in transforming the existing social order and its identities.

The modern politics of identity carries out the idea of government from equals to equals. The interruption of such rational logic of domination allows politics to emerge as a vehement element from an auto-regulating, single, and hegemonic thought. It can open new spaces to the participation of those subjects who have been previously silenced. It can be destabilized as new political subjects take the word, question the relationship between knowledge and social effectiveness, and change their trajectories in the space of the political community.

Responsive politics of difference should go beyond the treatment of otherness according to consensus and hegemony of economic laws, because they define groups meticulously organized by different levels of resource and access to the marketplace. Politics of difference can only be effective if they face the challenges offered by the voices of conflict that form new political subjects. These new individuals and groups, which assume a symbolic role, open up new spaces within the transformation of the social dimension of existing spaces.

Citizenship intrinsically relates to the recognition of urban space as a site of struggle inhabited by individuals and social groups who are engaged in the constitution of social and individual differences. Cities represent the place of condensation of heterogeneous social groups and forms of identification. These qualities can be made more visible through the mobilization of a politics of difference, and the redefinition of urban spatial boundaries by emerging social groups.

Urban spaces and new political subjects in housing movements in São Paulo

Current housing and land movements in São Paulo constitute a basic element in the expansion of rights to the city to a larger population. By incorporating a large amount of individuals kept in the situation of semi-citizenship, these grassroots movements have reconfigured and reorganized the struggle over urban spaces and contributed to their social and physical improvement. Ultimately, they represent the emergence of new political subjects within the public sphere, similar to what political philosopher Jacques Rancière (1996) has suggested about the notion of disagreement, or dissent, to describe the political potential of social and cultural conflicts.
Disagreement, or dissent, enhances difference as an alternate possibility to work out social antagonism and cultural differences. It mediates the definition of urban public and private spaces, as well as the varying interests of individuals and groups included in and excluded from them. The confrontation between different voices does not necessarily take place in a belligerent opposition, since according to Rancière “dissent is not a war of all against all.” Basically, disagreement should foster ordered situations of conflict. It should encourage discussion and argumentation not only among previously defined partners. Above all, dissent should define the mode through which social and public argumentation takes place, and the situation in which new public subjects and actions are constituted, such as in the case of housing movements in downtown São Paulo.

There are about 185,000 people living in tenements in the central area of São Paulo. Many of these properties house several families co-inhabiting a few rooms and are often squalid. There is little or no maintenance, and it is very common to find lease contracts that are not regulated. Tenants pay rents — usually under the table — of up to 200 US dollars, which is almost twice the average income in Brazil. This illegal practice, which is overlooked by corrupt city inspectors, favors the imposition of conditions determined by landlords, leaving tenants with no rights of permanence or even rent negotiation guaranteed by the legal system. Even though a large number of these informal tenants generally have little or no access to the same rights that protect landlords, they actively participate in the formal labor market. For example, 10% of jobs offered just by the City of São Paulo are concentrated in the downtown area. Tenement residents subject themselves to such situation because it is often the only alternative to live close to their jobs, since there are no housing policies or even mortgage and financing mechanisms available to low-income residents.

Political participation based on dissent calls for the reinterpretation of democracy and the exercise of citizenship by replacing formal, stable and universal definitions. This form of action reconfigures the advocacy for alternatives to urban spatial problems and contributes to their social and physical improvement. It was within this framework that political movements that started in São Paulo in the 1970s and gained political power. According to Camila Maleronka (2001) this struggle has been strongly supported by entities such as Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (Church Community Groups), which represents progressive sectors of the catholic Church, and Partido dos Trabalhadores (Worker’s Party) among other political institutions engaged in the struggle for human rights. Many of these groups joined into “União dos Movimentos de Moradia” (UMM) (United Housing Movement), created in 1987 to advocate and act in favor of better housing conditions for low-income residents in São Paulo. Similar coalitions have been formed since then. For example, groups such as “Unificação das Lutas dos Cortiços” (United Tenement Struggle) in 199, and “Fórum de Cortiços e Sem Tetos de São Paulo” (Forum for Tenement Residents and Homeless in São Paulo) in 1995 have 5,000 members organized to participate in negotiations with the state government of São Paulo in order to develop policies and programs favoring dispossessed urban populations.

Public housing and urban revitalization in São Paulo: policies in conflict

The historic center of São Paulo has been one of the most important stages for the political conflicts among different sectors of Paulista society since the end of the military regime. These conflicts became even more conspicuous in the 1990s, with the emergence of several civil entities with dissonant programs and goals especially engaged with the intervention in the cultural sphere and in the open spaces of the city. These activities have completely changed the way through which political negotiations, including those for housing, take place in São Paulo.
A good example of this shift is the fact that until organized grass-roots and non-governmental groups started to fight for public housing in the historic center, the City did not provide housing for low-income residents in its proposal for urban and economic redevelopment in the area. The work of those groups was essential to redirect the debate on housing in the São Paulo. Even though the historic downtown has traditionally been a place of residence for a large population, the novelty in this process has to do with the nature of the political conflict. It claims to redirect vacant real estate stock to ensure the presence of low-income housing in the central region of the city.

Housing movements in the central areas of São Paulo have increasingly gained power in the last couple of decades. They have organized tactics with the technical support of social workers and designers for forcing legal and political authorities to respond to their claim for better housing. One of the most controversial actions among these groups was the occupation of vacant buildings, showing that the rejection of certain social groups from democratic representation can lead to even more complicated scenarios. The scale of this radical take over has been both unprecedented and worrisome to the City. In the last five years, seventeen buildings that were vacant for more than ten years have been taken over by 1,300 families in the central areas of the city.

Despite the fact that the real estate market sees this kind of appropriation as negative and problematic, some people are more optimistic about its political role. According to architect and city councilor Nabil Bonduki (2001), the illegal occupation of vacant buildings creates an important political change. Under the pressure of squatters, it has become more and more difficult to ignore the problem presented by tenements and by the lack of low-income housing in the face of the existence of a considerable stock of vacant buildings in the downtown area. This confrontation potentially contributes to the debate about the rights to housing financed by government agencies, and to the design of units that should not follow the old bureaucratic model of minimal-cost housing in the outskirts of the city. Instead, this situation presents the possibility for exploring public housing policies and practices in a larger sense. In addition to providing housing units, these policies and practices should also ensure the access to the rights to the city – and to be in the city – as well as to the infrastructure, and economic and cultural opportunities that the regular city has to offer.

But not all events have taken the same direction in the struggle over urban space in the downtown area. In a different line of action, the City has promoted consecutive practices of downtown revitalization since the 1970s. The idea of renovation of a large area of the expanded center of the city became stronger with the creation of Associação Viva o Centro (Live Downtown Association), a private non-profit organization established in the early 1990s to sponsor urban redevelopment in the historic center of São Paulo. Representatives of real estate market, civil society and prestigious financial and business institutions are among the founders of this coalition between city government and the private sector. Several of the private partners have significant national and international projection and financial power, such as the São Paulo Stock Exchange and more notably the Bank of Boston, which plays a hegemonic role in the programs developed by Viva o Centro.

The transformation of Barcelona into an urban post-industrial, cultural, and entertainment center in the 1980s provided the guidelines for the urban revitalization projects carried out by Viva o Centro in São Paulo. The Catalan model promoted decisions based on the fabricated consensus that underused and undervalued strategic spaces of the historic center should be preserved for causes with clear economic implications. This is the same discourse that supports current practices of strategic planning and urban development in different centers of global modernization. In the derivative case of São Paulo, the different members of Viva o Centro legitimized their intentions and activities by announcing that the historic downtown was semi-
defunct, violent, and physically deteriorated, an idea that was largely absorbed and broadcast by the press. To counter the perceived imagine of urban decay, the association advocated the need to transform São Paulo into a world city with a strong and well-articulated centrality with large investment in projects for capital accumulation.

Despite the initial interest in promoting social policies, in concrete terms, the public-private coalition has prioritized public investments in symbolic projects to raise real estate value in the area. To cite an example, the investment of public resources has been predominantly directed to the recovery and conversion of historic buildings. This is certainly a noble cause. However, what underlines this monoculture of urban projects is the shift in the target population. As these institutions increasingly attract high-income users to the city, they tend to exclude low-income citizens who have traditionally occupied downtown areas. This change has made the gaps between different social groups in the city even more visible. Given this controversial and contentious situation, one can see that the strong presence of social movements claiming for better housing policies in the historic center of the city is not merely a coincidence.

According to architect Sarah Feldman (2001), member of the City Council’s Committee for Housing Studies, the number of activist groups has increased since the creation of Viva o Centro. This reaction responds to the fact that the programs coordinated by the coalition present higher threat of eviction among low-income groups in areas of increased real estate value. Forum Centro Vivo (Live Downtown Forum) is one of the most recent examples of this phenomenon. It includes many of the institutions that have traditionally coordinated housing movements such as labor and student unions, NGOs, the Catholic Church, cultural groups, technical consultants, and entities for the defense of human rights. This large group was created in 2000 primarily to propose low-income housing policies for the central districts that avoid the displacement of social groups victimized by real estate development.

The examples of recent housing movements and redevelopment projects in the historic center of São Paulo illustrate a complex urban scenario of dissent. In this situation, not only is there opposition among different groups, there is also a conflicting dialogue about the symbolic and material ways to produce urban space. These movements have produced positive results such as the creation of public credit lines for financing low-income housing as well as changes in legislation to allow the social use of existing building stock in the city. Housing movements are based on the need to transform both the discourses and the conditions under which social debate and negotiation for the right to the city occur. They ultimately reveal different rationalities about what the city is and what it should be.

This article has shown two contemporary phenomena that affect how architecture, urban space, and social differences are related in the renovation of the historic center of São Paulo. On the one hand, the connectivity to transnational transfer of capital enhances middle and upper-class sociability, improves the symbolic economy of the city, and creates contrasting urban models and design practices. On the other hand, new housing movements contribute to consolidate democratic practices in the local scale of the city. They create possibilities for enlarging the exercise of citizenship beyond the realm of the nation-state and traditional politics. They create new forms of presence in the public sphere and in the spaces of the city. They are evidence of the need for access by different social groups to economic, civil and cultural rights that must be represented in the public sphere. Conflicts over the production of urban space and the representation of differences in the urban territory are necessary elements to the advancement of democratic production of urban space.

New housing movements create new forms of presence in the public sphere and in the spaces of the city. They create possibilities for enlarging the exercise of citizenship from the abstract realm of the nation-state to the concrete and spatial realm of the city. Disagreement over the production of urban space and the representation of social differences are necessary
elements to the advancement of democratic life. In a moment when significant values are challenged or have been strategically declared dead - utopias, the public sphere, including our notion of city - these changes and differences can make the ground for the practice of design more fertile and vast. They keep the challenge open to continuously rethink urban design and planning models as a form-giving process that inevitably engages human and social life, and as a complex and multifaceted activity that cannot separate aesthetic practices and choices from ethical principles. Under good guidance and truly democratic leadership, we should expect that the respect for differences be preserved and that the everyday facts of our presence in the collective sphere of cities remain meaningful as they continuously change.
Bibliography


