

## **Architecture acts, too! Protests and proposals for housing in Brazil**

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### **Abstract**

This visual essay explores how architecture can become a site, subject, and agent of cultural protest when it is reclaimed by contemporary urban movements. Numerous urban movements have formed in Brazil and across Latin America to counteract pervasive social injustices related to housing access, women rights, racial inequality, and poverty. Gathering hundreds of thousands of low-income families, homeless movements are among Brazil's most radical and emblematic grassroots movements, occupying numerous vacant buildings and obsolete terrains. How, then, are such movements capitalising on the agency of architecture to protest perceived injustices while simultaneously demonstrating alternative proposals? This visual essay uncovers social injustices through images taken by the author.

**KEYWORDS:** architecture, protest, injustice, homeless, housing

## Introduction

Brazilian cities are among the world's most unequal territories, with deeply entrenched social injustice (Holston, 2008). Urban social movements have always been protagonists in fighting these injustices related to unequal access to housing, healthcare, employment, education and the like (Sader, 2001). Edward Soja (2010) has rightfully illustrated how such social movement struggles for justice are fundamentally spatial, concerned with space as much as manifested and negotiated in and through space. In such light, Brazilian homeless movements engaged in building and land occupations are foremost spatial actors, acting against the way in which urban space is allocated (or not) to different social groups (Stevens, 2018). Resulting occupations of space denounce severe injustice against basic human and constitutional rights to dignified housing. In that vein, occupied buildings are frequently turned into symbolic totems of protest. Deploying a vast lexicon of protest-oriented "resistance aesthetics" (Rogger et al., 2018), buildings' material culture is semiotically subverted, replacing former expressions of opulence and economic prosperity into totems of popular revolt. Vacant properties are draped in black *pixação* tags to denounce the repugnant proliferation of unused building in well-serviced central urban areas. Such tags have been recognised as cultural accusations of spatial injustice encapsulated in the highly divided building fabric of the city (T.P.d.R. Caldeira, 2012; T.P.R., Caldeira, 2015), not coincidentally rebuked precisely by reclaiming the buildings' facades that act as the architectural thresholds separating the city's private and public realm. Movement flags, banners, and graffiti further propagate struggles for human rights, reclaiming buildings as what Zibechi (2012) called "territories in resistance". McLagan and McKee (2012) have drawn attention to the political agency of such "activist imaginaries", actively engaging in power struggles through visual media. By occupying buildings and subsequently adjusting their cultural meaning by means of highly visual signifiers, buildings are directly engaged in the public political debates over urban inclusion and exclusion, capitalising by and large on the communicative agency and performativity of the highly valued and exposed architecture of central urban areas. Much more can be learned about the spatiality of (in)justice in contemporary cities by carefully examining such transformed and re-coded buildings and signs through the lenses of cultural anthropology and urban studies in general.

While occupied buildings are turned into beacons of protest towards the outside, a whole other story unfolds towards the inside. Building structures themselves, often embodying intricate legacies of use and abandonment, prosperity, and decay, are reclaimed to serve as basic infrastructures for housing. In this manner, homeless movements simultaneously push for protest and proposal. Occupations capitalise on the agency of ar-

chitecture to demonstrate in a double sense: first, as symbolic demonstrations protesting urban injustice; second, as pragmatic demonstrations of alternative paths to improved urban justice. For the latter, temporary emergency-housing is installed by and for the city's lowest-income families within the architectural relics of abandoned constructions. In contrast to widely known architectural debate on "self-help" housing (See, e.g., Turner & Fichter, 1972; Turner, 1976), low-income housing in vertical building occupations rather exploits and reclaims previous building investments instead of fully depending on the capacity of oppressed groups to develop housing solutions autonomously. Latour (2005) famously declared that "Objects act, too!", advocating for a genuine acknowledgement of non-human agency. If anything, homeless movements in Brazil illustrate by the same token that "Architecture acts, too!". Occupations ingeniously capitalise on the agency of architecture to evoke a culture of protest precisely where it hurts and where urban injustice is most severely felt: in downtown cities. Nevertheless, arguably even more significant, occupations prefigure alternative and more just forms of urban development by identifying and prefiguring the enormous resourcefulness contained by vacant buildings for serving dire societal needs. Urban movements hence render vacant architecture as a tremendous opportunity for building towards improved urban justice.

This series of photographs of occupied architecture in Brazil seeks to illustrate how urban movements draw from this particular agency of architecture to protest and propose concurrently. The underlying hypothesis holds that new opportunities for urban justice emerge precisely in the bodily encounter of urban movements and architectural objects. This contribution draws from multiple years of participatory fieldwork among urban homeless movements in Brazil from 2013 to 2020.



*Image 1: 'Occupy and Resist, Rights for Women!' Marielle Franco Occupation, carried out by the MTST (Homeless Workers' Movement), and named after the black political activist and feminist Marielle Franco who was murdered by military police in 2018 in Rio de Janeiro (Recife, 2019).*



***Image 2:** 9 de Julho Occupation, carried out by MSTC (Homeless Movement of the Centre) in 2018. The famed art-deco building was in the 1940s one of the first skyscrapers of São Paulo, designed by the well-known Jayme Fonseca Rodrigues. Decades after housing the National Social Security Institute, it is now one of the most notorious squats in the downtown city. Incremental window replacements and paint indicate the gradual re-appropriation of the building (Photo by author).*



*Image 3: Ipiranga Occupation, first occupied in 2012 by the MSTC, but currently changed into MMRC, the Housing Movement of the Central Region. The former luxurious residential building sits right beside central São Paulo's most legendary crossroads, where the Bar Brahma attracts the city's richest clientele for a late-night chopp draft beer on the famous corridor of the São João and Ipiranga Avenues. 'Against real estate corruption,' reads the banner. In graffiti below: 'FLM' (Alliance of the Housing Struggle) and "MSTC" (Homeless Movements of the Centre): 'Direito de Sonhar e Viver' (the Right to Dream and Live) (Photo by author).*



*Image 4: Occupation in the Martins Fontes Street, managed by five different movements amongst which the MMPT (Housing Movement for All) and the MMC (Housing Movement of the Centre). In graffiti on the defensive plywood panels to the left: 'Lutar Sempre, Desistir Jamais' (To Struggle, Always, to Give Up, Never) (Photo by author).*



*Image 5: The Ouidor Occupation, overlooking São Paulo's central bus terminal. The twelve-story building formerly served as the municipal department of culture. After being one of the best-known occupations of the MMC (Housing Movement of the Centre) between 1997 and 2005, the building was repeatedly squatted by homeless artists. It is currently occupied by a highly diverse and dynamic community of artists and low-income families for whom the building itself became a most significant work of art itself. Drawing on "urban recycling" the Ouidor-group seeks to live and produce art from the "left-overs" of their urban surroundings, and the creative reclaim of the stepped concrete building serves as the foremost case in point (Photo by author).*



***Image 6:** The Mauá Occupation in São Paulo's Luz neighbourhood, by the MMLJ (Housing Movement of the Struggle for Justice), celebrating in 2017 its '10 years of struggle.' The inner courtyard of the former motel currently provides a meeting and celebration space for about 240 homeless families (Photo by author).*



*Image 7: The Wilton Paes de Almeida Occupation, at the central Paisandu Square of São Paulo was occupied for years by the MLSM (Movement of Social Struggle for Housing) affiliated to the LMD (Struggle for Dignified Housing). The entire 24-floor building collapsed after a devastating fire on Workers' Day, May the 1<sup>st</sup> 2018. 'If housing is a right, to occupy is a duty', exclaimed the backdoor entrance. The giant skyscraper had served first as the headquarter building of Brazil's national glass company, and later as the national police department before it was vacated and eventually occupied (Photo by author).*



*Image 8: The monumental entrance of the José Bonifacio Occupation, squatted by the MMRC (Housing Movement of the Central Region) illustrates how downtown occupations tap into the spatial opportunities offered by former architectural investments. The rich decorations and spacious design of this former “grand hotel” easily accommodate new needs and aspirations (Photo by author).*



*Image 9: The Rio Branco Occupation, by MSTC (Homeless Movement of the Centre) exemplifies the creative use of former architectural investments. Here, a small cluster of dwelling units with shared sanitary facilities was pieced together in the remainders of an old cinema hall. If outwards visual language seeks to express protest and defence, inwards decoration is in search of new forms of domesticity and peaceful living together. (Source: Author).*



***Image 10:** The former exclusive Hotel Cambridge, built in central São Paulo in the 1950s, was occupied by the MSTC (Homeless Movement of the Centre) in 2012. After six years of resistance, the building was finally approved for retrofit into social housing. At this moment, former occupants are involved in the refurbishment works. Emptied out again, the vacant quarters emphasise again the agency held by performative architecture to serve multiple functions and contribute to more just urban futures (Photo by author).*

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## **Povzetek**

Vizualni esej raziskuje, kako lahko arhitektura postane mesto, subjekt in agent kulturnega protesta, ko jo izkoristijo sodobna urbana gibanja. V Braziliji in po latinski Ameriki so se oblikovala številna urbana gibanja, ki naj bi nasprotovala širokim socialnim krivicam, povezanim z dostopom do stanovanj, pravicami žensk, rasno neenakostjo in revščino. Ker združujejo na stotisoče družin z nizkimi dohodki, so brezdomska gibanja med najradikalnejšimi in najbolj simboličnimi gibanji v Braziliji, ki zasedajo številne proste stavbe in nekoristne terene. Kako potem takšna gibanja izkoriščajo arhitekturno agencijo, da protestirajo zaradi zaznane krivice, hkrati pa demonstrirajo alternativne predloge? Ta vizualni esej razkriva socialne krivice s pomočjo avtorjevih slik.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** arhitektura, protest, krivica, brezdomci, stanovanje

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