

# Prototypes of Urbanism: Urban Movements Occupying Central São Paulo

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*Myriad members of urban movements are occupying vacant urban spaces in central São Paulo. This article explores whether and how particular prototypes of urbanism are germinating from such reclamations of vacant architecture. If urbanism is understood as a deliberate intervention in the material urban environment as a means of ameliorating mankind's artificial living environment, how then are urban movements prefiguring alternative ways of going about this? In other words, how does the intermittent inhabiting of such occupations take part in reconceptualizing and remaking the city? And what prototypical model of urbanism does this bring in its wake? First, São Paulo will be discussed as an arrival city, where migration, urbanization and urban movement synchronously emerged. Second, the center's vacancy will be examined as a distinct spatial condition that, together with increasing migratory arrival, set the stage for urban occupation movements to squat downtown buildings. Third, particular contemporary occupation practices in the central city will be highlighted, exploring how multiple occupation movements carve out spaces of cohabitation in the center's vacant architecture. Finally, conclusions will be drawn on how such occupations might figure as prototypes of an alternative mode of city making. The parallel photo-essay seeks to shed light on the architectural and proto-urbanistic realm of occupations. The research underpinning this text stems from a close collaboration with multiple social movements, cultural collectives, human rights associations and governmental and academic institutions in São Paulo. Approximately two years of participant-observation were spent in occupations, and multiple workshops, debates and exhibitions were organized in occupations over the course of varied fieldwork periods.*

**Keywords:** Architecture of the city, social movements, squatting, urban activism, urban design

## ARRIVAL CITY

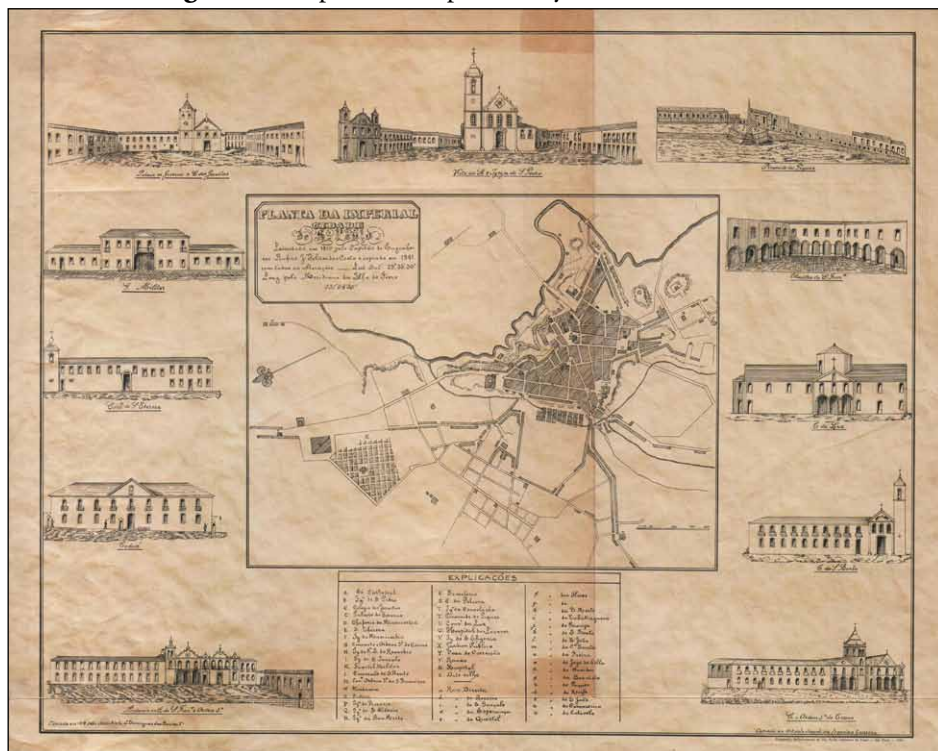
Like many cities, São Paulo is a migrant city. Its architecture has been shaped by ceaseless flows of migratory arrival over five centuries. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, São Paulo was a small town. It was occupied by missionaries, Portuguese exiles, criminals and orphans, daredevil traders and adventurers, for-

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merly nomadic tribesmen, and Blacks; São Paulo was a cultural maelstrom from the very outset (Metcalf, 2005; Morse, 1958). At least until the introduction of land tenure in 1850, the free occupation of land conditioned by cultivation was São Paulo's most commonplace principle for settling (Rolnik, 1997). Overall, the Atlantic forest-landscape of the Paulistanian plateau was considered 'vacant', replete with development potential, hitherto unexplored and readily available to be taken in. The right to occupy such vacant land, supposedly *res nullius*, arguably constitutes the most archetypical and universal 'hidden history of housing' (Ward, 2002), predating any other urbanization formula. As a result, the area of nineteenth century São Paulo, which largely overlaps with the perimeter of the area today designated as 'o centro' (Figure 1), was, in fact, a constellation of land-occupations made by a population brought on the move for a variety of reasons. São Paulo was built from miscellaneous migrant occupations even before it was a city.

**Figure 1:** 'Map of the Imperial City of São Paulo', 1810



Note: The perimeter represented largely overlaps with the city's contemporary 'centro velho', or old center. Source: Secretaria de Estado de Economia e Planejamento, Instituto Geográfico e Cartográfico.

From last quarter of the nineteenth century onwards, successive immigrant streams fueled the vast expansion of the urban conurbation. In the transformation from a town to a city, São Paulo underwent during the same decades its first pervasive housing crisis (Bonduki, 1998). European workers were simultaneously pushed away by demographic pressure, economic depression, dictatorships and war, and attracted by extensive 'New World' propaganda and State-funded migration subsidies. As the Municipality recruited, transported and redistributed foreign labor power, they supported the Paulistanian coffee boom and rising industrial modernity. Sixty percent of the 4.1 million migrants that entered Brazil between 1886 and 1934 ended up in São Paulo and turned the city into Latin America's capital metropolitan powerhouse (Holloway, 1980).

As migrants poured in, the former colonial elite increasingly vacated the congested center and searched for higher grounds. Inner city *sobrados* (townhouses), mansions, warehouses, stables and shacks were subsequently subdivided and subleased to new arrivals. As one population evacuated the center, newcomers recycled the material remnants that had been forsaken. Proliferating inner-city *cortiços* (downtown tenements) offered cheap, viable and essentially central dwelling options for the worker population. By the dawn of the twentieth century, an estimated one-third of São Paulo's dwellings were *cortiços*, housing the majority of its poorest arrivals in adapted older constructions and newly erected tenements (Kowarick & Ant, 1989).

Migration to the city continued as industrial growth and development proceeded throughout the twentieth century. Between the 1930s and 1950s, substantial investments were made in urban infrastructure, including a city-wide system of public avenues, parks and squares, which led to a vast 'verticalization' boom of the adjacent building tissue (Somekh, 2014). São Paulo was to be the center of Latin America's leap into modernity (Andreoli & Forty, 2004; Williams, 2009), and unsurprisingly, the historical center was partly redesigned to materialize this new modern world.

Halfway the twentieth century, middle- and higher-class population groups increasingly moved out of the central area, but its wide boulevards and worthy architecture were waiting to accommodate new users. The center, caught between the discrepant centripetal and centrifugal fluxes of arrival and departure, acquired the foundation of its highly unique contemporary urban character. On the one hand, it was the best located area in the city, and received more urbanistic attention than any other district. The center featured some of the city's most remarkable masterpieces of modern architecture, and received significant investment in public works. Yet, on the other hand, vacancy started to increase, and much of the worthy architecture became abandoned.

São Paulo's magnetic effect on migration engendered a pandemic rural-urban transfer that took off in the 1970s, culminated in the 1980s, and is continuing today although at a slower pace. Between 1970 and 1980, Latin America as a whole became a predominantly urban society, with 64 percent of its population living in cities of more than 20,000 inhabitants by 1980 (Gilbert, 1994). Although many

rural settlements continued to grow in absolute terms, legions of peasants were moving to the cities. New modes of transport and improved infrastructure eased the move, and many rural emigrants could soon count on established local relatives or acquaintances to show them the ropes of city life (Gilbert, 1996; Santos, 1996). Remittances to the countryside partly allowed rural families to survive, while simultaneously conveying an imaginary of the megacity's 'promise of progress'. The city radiated opportunity, prospect and hope. As migrants flowed in, São Paulo continued to raise its productivity and development, and therefore its attractiveness, in a mutually beneficial cycle of urbanization and migration. São Paulo's metropolitan region consequently grew into a megacity, expanding from a habitat of eight million inhabitants in 1970 into a city of more than 12,500,000 by 1980. Between 1970 and 1990, São Paulo's metropolitan population doubled, absorbing in two decades the same population growth as during its previous five centuries of urbanization (IBGE, 2010).

During this major population growth, the absence of sufficient spatial and social infrastructures forced São Paulo's rural arrivals to initiate the self-construction of supposedly 'interim' shelter on peripheral land. Despite significant investments of the Federal Housing Bank, the state-led provision of social housing could not keep up with uninterrupted arrival, and consequently the city's peripheries were overtaken by squatter settlements (Maricato, 1982, 2011). In 1973, favelas made up a mere one percent of São Paulo's dwellings; by the end of the 1980s they comprised more than ten percent of the housing stock (Pasternak Tascher, 1995). By 1993, an estimated twenty percent of the city's housing stock took the form of squatted favelas (FIPE – SEHAB, 1994).

The city's migration-based urbanization boom of the 1970s and the resulting proliferation of squatter settlements paved the way for the widespread emergence of urban movements (Fix & Arantes, 2003; Foweraker, 2001). Members of these movements promptly entered the city's spatial and political stage as new, forceful actors (Gohn, 1991; Sader, 2001), a tendency which broadly resonated throughout the continent (Escobar & Alvarez, 1992). The urban movements were born in the purported urban 'margins' and from those that the city had largely left 'without' ('without homes, without land, without work, without rights, without property, without capital' (Zibechi, 2012, 41)). Movement members began to move themselves, rejecting the materially and socially deprived spaces that the city had allocated to them. They consequently brought to the city a broad repertoire of 'insurgent' claims for equal access to the promises that urban life could offer, including access to land, housing, education, work, recreation and healthcare (Holston, 2008).

Insofar as migration was the lifeblood of São Paulo's urbanization process, and vice versa, the conflict-ridden tension between arrival (in expectation of urban inclusion) and urbanization (unable to keep up and deliver dignified urban conditions for the arriving masses) provoked a plethora of struggles over space (Kowarick, 1989). During the last decades of the twentieth century, São Paulo's center in partic-

ular, became an urban stage where discontent was regularly ventilated and exposed. Protesters regularly occupied central squares, boulevards and streets, particularly since they were imbued with historical meaning and symbolic significance. Here, in the city's historic cradle, in the middle of things, claims were made that in fact addressed the entire city. The center's distinct urban morphology, structured by an extensive system of boulevards, squares and parks, flanked by a rich juxtaposition of highly symbolic architecture, proved to be a political agora par excellence, providing the most strategic and exposed public forum for sharing discontent, contentment or pride. In the 1980s, the massive *Direitas Já* protests took over the central squares and boulevards to eventually bring down military rule in 1985. In June 2013, the country-wide protests, inflamed by São Paulo's 'passe livre' free transport movement, incited pervasive revolts to take over the center for two weeks. Renowned Paulistanian urban scholar Ermínia Maricato was not surprised: 'It is the urban question, stupid!' (2013, 19).

In 2016, protests both in favor and against the impeachment of the Workers' Party's president Dilma Rousseff inundated the center. Protestors from all parts of the metropolis assembled there and navigated symbolic itineraries. The center's urban morphology provided not merely passive support, but acted as a subject of popular action. Its architecture resonates with Solnit's (2001, 218) 'ideal insurrectionary city', where 'stone and cement are soaked with meanings, with histories, with memories' and underscore the vital midpoint of things. The center's double-coded urban realm, where urban authorities live side-by-side with urban pariahs, was the backdrop for the rise of insurgent occupation movements that would manifest spatial claims. Insofar as demonstrations address the architecture of the city with collective bodily action, they simultaneously create mobile architectural scenography and theatrical props to reinforce such claims. Through the occupation of space, the bodily mass becomes a mobile spatial body in itself. Colored shirts, flags, banners, balloons, graffiti, tents, trucks, drums and the like orchestrate a demonstrative performance on the urban stage.

## VACANT CITY

During the last two decades of the previous century, almost 5,300,000 migrants settled in São Paulo's metropolitan region, while simultaneously an exodus of approximately 180,000 inhabitants took place from the city's most symbolic *Região Central* (IBGE, 2010). As the city's population grew by 42 percent, the center lost 30 percent of its inhabitants. Between 1980 and 2000, the megacity's oldest district of *Sé* lost nearly 40 percent of its entire population (IBGE, 2010). As a result, an estimated 40,000 registered central dwellings were left vacant by the turn of the millennium (Silva, Biava, & Sígolo, 2009). The additional depository of many more abandoned hotels, factories, office buildings, storehouses, commercial enterprises,

cinemas, theatres, hospitals and other architectural cascos was never calculated. In the meantime, central lots and buildings were increasingly repurposed into parking spaces, temporarily storing automobiles in the relics of former cinema halls, palaces, hangars, industrial halls or department stores. In a metropolis dominated by car-use, such parking facilities are highly lucrative, and often said to bring more cash as any other program (Nakano, Campos, & Rolnik, 2004; Silva et al., 2009).

In addition, numerous buildings have been under-occupied, leaving countless square meters unused or inhabited by a mere concierge, a few tenants or security guards hired to protect properties from unwanted ‘invaders’. The report of the Fundação João Pinheiro calculated that in 2012, São Paulo’s metropolitan region counted an estimated 571,491 ‘vacant domiciles with the potential of being occupied’ (Pinheiro, 2015, 43). This number almost equaled the listed housing deficit of 586,129 urbanites left homeless or living in precarious conditions (Pinheiro, 2015, p 33). Somewhat cynically, one could picture two parallel hidden cities dispersed over São Paulo’s urbanized agglomeration: a material city of vacant architecture, awaiting new destinies, and a human city of homeless, perpetually on the lookout for improved dwelling opportunities.

Vacancy is highly visible in the center’s architectural realm, plainly emphasized by innumerable pixos, black tags left by Pixadores, who target the center’s vacant architecture – and preferably its most iconic assortment – to graphically express discontent on the city’s vast social and spatial inequality (Caldeira, 2012). Pixação, not to be confused with the more ‘hip’ and less ‘dissident’ graffiti, has come to cover entire façades of the center’s accumulated vacant patrimony, in a perpetual competition to adorn the highest, most visible and most unreachable surfaces of the streetscape with aggressive black writing, simultaneously displaying numerous ‘hidden’ peripheral youth lives and underscoring the astonishing abundance of central architecture left to rot.

Downtown São Paulo’s concentration of vacant properties is the result of a complex conflation of legal, political, economic and architectural currents. Many buildings are caught up in ownership disputes, inheritance controversies or lack the paperwork necessary for legal sale. In the political spectrum, incremental ‘IPTU’<sup>1</sup> taxation which fines unused properties has proven too meager; it has hardly been monitored or controlled, and has been easily bypassed or plainly neglected, and has consequently failed to enforce property owners attributing a so-called ‘social function’ to their properties, as legally prescribed by the Constitution’s 182nd article, which in fact defines property as legitimate only if used (Friendly, 2013). Innumerable buildings have piled up tax debts this way, but together with unpaid water and electricity bills, they left owners unable or reluctant to sell or rent their inheritance. Following economic logics, many Paulistanian scholars (Raquel Rolnik, personal communication, 19/2/2015; Pedro Arantes, personal communication 22/2/2015) refer to landowners’ speculation as one of the principal explanations for São Paulo’s downtown vacancy, where land values are greater than the com-

mercial value of buildings themselves, making the buildings financially irrelevant in comparison to high-priced central land holdings (Silva, 2000, 2009). Frequently, only the most lucrative commercial basement floors are rented for commercial enterprises such as retail stores, lanchonette-snack bars, restaurants, or parking spaces. Upper floors, in turn, are left abandoned in order to avoid administrative costs and problems related to rental contracts, management and maintenance, in particular in high-rise elevator-dependent constructions.

Part of the center's historical patrimony has suffered from severe decay, requiring expansive refurbishments to accommodate formally approved re-uses or maintain functionality and profitability. Conservation measures have additionally frozen the potential redevelopment of buildings with architectural heritage. With three independent heritage departments, respectively managed by federal, state, and municipal governmental administration, procedures to acquire restoration permits are an outright Kafkaesque bureaucratic nightmare. Furthermore, shifting market standards have prevented the office-towers, built en masse between the city's prosperous 1940s and 1960s from complying with contemporary norms or expectations. Many buildings lack, for instance, central air-conditioning systems, integrated parking spaces, flexible open office floors, or infrastructure for extensive ICT networks. The shift of the city center has marginalized many commercial spaces and once famous hotels, theaters or cinemas, causing them to become abandoned (Simões, 1990).

From the 1970s onwards, the city center gradually migrated from the 'old' historical location to the south-west, where first the Avenida Paulista, and later the Avenida Pinheiros and Avenida Faria Lima developed into the city's foremost new business centers (Frugoli, 2000). In addition, the architectural appearance of many older buildings no longer aligned with the commercial image that enterprises sought to convey. Developers apparently preferred, in general, to erect new buildings in novel 'central' urban hotspots, rather than renovate buildings in the traffic-congested old center (Nakano et al., 2004). The rampant urban growth of the twentieth century occurred at such a quick pace that that 'renovation' and 'refurbishment' remained marginal practices, dwarfed by the ever-growing construction boom in the periphery of the endlessly expanding megacity.

Meanwhile, central cortiços suffered from increased evictions and military interventions during the military regime (1964-1985). Rising rents, declining wages and increasing unemployment also caused the expulsion of many of the center's ecortçados to peripheral squats or evacuated them into subsidized peripheral housing estates (Santos, 1996). The homeless who occupied central open spaces were increasingly removed by military groups from the center's squares, parks, bridges and sidewalks. By the 1980s it became harder and harder for the urban poor to maintain residence downtown. In the same period that migrants massively arrived in the city, the old centre was increasingly abandoned.

Caught-up in a limbo between degradation and renewal, vacant buildings were stripped from strict functional prescriptions, and hence became open for practical

and semiotic recycling. Their location remained very much central, despite migrating programs and functions. Numerous vacant buildings were still prestigious edifices, nested in the most historical core of the metropolis, sitting along principal avenues, squares and parks. The dispersed constellation of omnipresent vacant buildings surfaced as a landscape of untapped spatial opportunities (Herscher, 2012). It is precisely in vacancy's temporarily undefined program, betwixt and between a formally defined extinct past and an uncertain, open-ended hereafter, that experimental urban practices find a fertile soil to nest, in the abundant supply of space suspended from use and meaning. This urban condition is not just a neutral, passive context of such occupation practices, but instead, the latent agency that invokes them: vacancy always implies a kind of invitation.

## OCCUPIED CITY

Central São Paulo's numerous vacant buildings, and the wide presence of organized urban movements, provoked a multitude of occupation practices from the 1990s onwards. Homeless movements, as one of the most vigorous examples, set out to occupy abandoned central buildings in the aftermath of violent evictions from *cortiços* in 1997. Neuhold (2009) illustrated how *sem-teto* movements very soon occupied vacant buildings in all corners of the center, while Sanches (2015) made clear how their actions compelled local authorities to repurpose or rebuilt at least 37 central buildings as social housing between 1990 and 2012. As occupations meanwhile branched out in the center's vacant fabric, homeless movements fine-tuned their tactical repertoire and ideological discourse, evolving into highly politicized 'new protagonists' in the center's political and spatial urban arena (Barbosa, 2014; Earle, 2017).

During the last two decades, urban movements brought thousands of homeless families 'in movement' for collectively claiming space in the center. Urban architecture did not merely provide the 'stage' on which occupation movement played out. These buildings were its very *raison d'être*, providing the spatial opportunity to claim genuine rights to the city and all the promises of progress it entailed, such as decent housing, proximity to urban services and job opportunities.

Two decades after the center's first organized homeless occupation, dozens of *sem-teto* movements have occupied hundreds of downtown vacant buildings along with a vast array of squatters not connected to any movement. Organized occupation movements have different political lineages and adopt diversified tactics. Some of their occupations have become illustrative case studies. The notorious Hotel Cambridge, for instance, was occupied in 2012 by MSTC, the Homeless Movement of the Center, inhabiting the building until 2017 with 170 of the city's lowest income families. The erstwhile downtown hotel hosted an endless series of highly political gatherings and communal initiatives related to education, care, and



production, and served as the subject of the now famous 'Era Hotel Cambridge' movie<sup>2</sup> (Stevens, 2017). The 26-story Prestes Maia building also became a symbol of popular resistance, recurrently occupied and evicted, but today again housing more than 500 families in the relicts of a concrete industrial complex. As a genuine micro-cosmology, the derelict building is now replete with micro-adaptations to readjust it for collective inhabitation. Both occupations appear as extraordinary 'dwelling complexes' (Maak, 2015), where in the absence of conventional and rigid occupational norms, more fluid ways of communal living have emerged, notwithstanding the sustained precariousness and overall poverty of their inhabitants. Here, experimental models of co-housing are tested, as movements are setting off to piece together alternative dwelling environments with the means at hand in the center's vacant architecture. In the provisional and incipient city-making that MSTC pursues as one of the most organized and performative downtown movements, other ways of city-making seem to emerge, challenging the collective imagination of how cities could be thought of, lived, and ordered differently. The mere recognition and subsequent demonstration of the spatial 'resourcefulness' held by the center's vacant architecture is therein of fundamental importance.

Some buildings have remained occupied for years. The Maua motel is inhabited by occupants from MMLJ, the Movement for Housing and Struggle for Justice since 2007. Most homeless occupations, however, are highly temporary, seizing vacant spaces for a few hours, days, weeks or months, and residences consequently dwell somewhere between makeshift encampments and home-made-homes, taking pride and glory from the often iconic architecture of the buildings they inhabit. Inside, their stay-overs remain temporary places of refuge, transitory settlements. The occupants, mainly rural migrants, are reluctantly tolerated for a while. The occupation is commonly more a *fait accompli* that owners and administrations have to live with than a wholeheartedly accepted situation. Expulsion remains a constant threat. This uncertainty makes these settlements extremely fragile.

As partially self-constructed and self-managed dwelling environments, occupants resemble Habraken's urbanistic 'alternative to mass housing', by recognizing vacant buildings as structural supports, never holding them as property, but nevertheless taking temporarily possession (Habraken, 1972). In the spirit of Habraken, such inhabitation can be seen as a profoundly architectural act. Cleaning, adapting interior spatial organizations with some plywood, hammer and nails, blocking or making new openings, repairing decrepit roofs, reinstalling plumbing and pipes, repainting façades and decorating interior walls, renewing a floor, camouflaging mould with curtains while decorating rooms: 'dwelling is building' (Habraken, 1972, 18). While building structures themselves remain largely unchanged, interiors, furniture, technical installations, and aesthetic decorations are modified incessantly, reflecting a mobile city in flux that capitalizes on a readily available building framework.

As exemplary 'bricoleurs', occupation movements operate incrementally, to 'making things better', while remaining caught up in the paradox of temporariness. Every

investment is a potential waste of resources. They are therefore very different from the incremental self-help housing of Latin American urban peripheries, such as the *barriadas* documented by Turner (1968) and others, where family-growth is gradually articulated in building consolidations and extensions, eventually developing entire urban districts. Central building occupations, instead, never truly consolidate, since they largely capitalize on existing buildings. It is precisely the temporary nature of merely 'camping' in already-available structures that provides a set of real-life demonstrations of what the vast stockpile of vacant buildings could potentially serve.

In the occupations' temporary encampment, daily routines are partly in phase with the rhythm of the city, but are complicated by internal rhythms of collective life. Working and living together, passing by the gate control, chats and gossip that have to ease the shared suffering of eternal stairclimbing, compulsory communal activities and movement gatherings, collective cleaning and working: occupation-life is willy nilly a communal endeavor, especially in buildings that were never designed to accommodate housing. The resulting shared life implies a tenacious balancing of private and communal life worlds. Here again, prototypical aspects surface, experimenting with an *existenzminimum* that is not based on private-owned single-household social apartments, but on principles of sharing and caring, regardless the everyday hardship this entails. For many families, it is precisely the communal life of occupations that proves a leverage to climb out of poverty. On the other hand, it also constitutes the main *raison* for numerous occupants to step out of occupation life, often preferring the more individual and free life in *favelas*, *cortiços*, or the street above the strictly regulated communal life imposed by many occupation movements.

Constructing a temporary refuge within the rudimentary layout of buildings, and minimally tinkering with its architecture, an idiosyncratic and 'home-made' dwelling environment is eventually installed. Sometimes this means simply re-inhabiting sound structures that are up for grabs, such as the spacious and luxurious occupied Hotel Lord, occupied by TNG 'Terra Nossa Gente' (the Soil of Our People) or the Conselheiro Carrão 202 occupation, occupied by MMPT, the Housing Movement for All. The latter was entirely refurbished before its sale was stuck in red tape. Other occupations have required more complex adaptation. In the Rio Branco 47 occupation, MSTC packed an old cinema hall with small dwelling units formed by new brickwork and plaster, while in José Bonifácio 137, 95 families subdivided the open office floors of the former office building using plywood panels in order to allow for a rapid demount and transport of the complete infill to a new occupation site in case of eviction.

As contemporary metropolitan nomads, the movements' architecture is necessarily flexible and mobile to allow for impromptu moves. They are a series of exploratory experiments *in situ*, testing ad-hoc makeshift solutions for the most urgent symptoms of a pervasive urban housing crisis. Their provisional nature and their

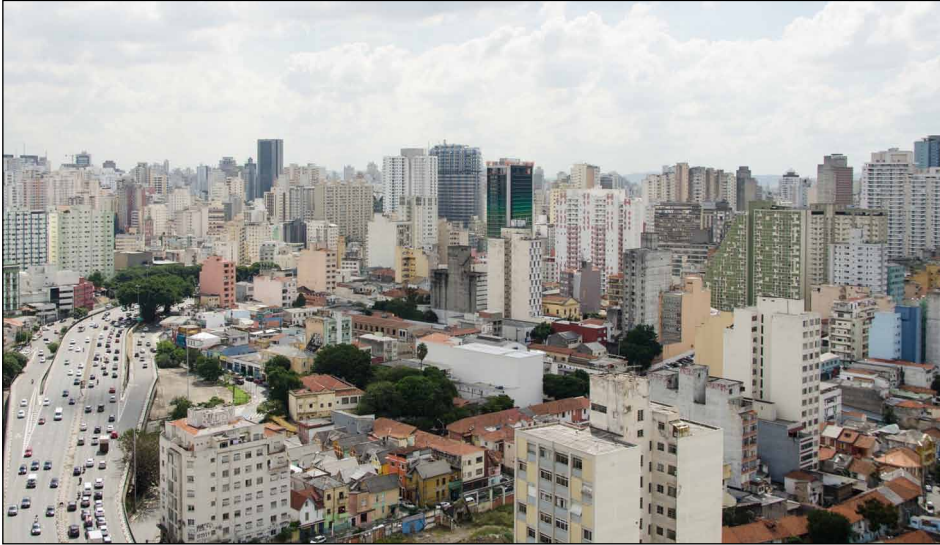
inherent creativity suggest new prototypes of urbanism that are simultaneously nomadic and troglodyte, transforming existing frames into a home for as long as it may last.

Central São Paulo's diversity of occupation practices constitutes a highly dynamic movement of movements. The movements share similar objectives and compete with one another to capitalize on the same material vacancy. Conflicts arise, especially due to criminal infiltration, which emerges from the very same entrenched poverty, but represents a very different coping strategy for escaping segregation and exclusion. Narco-traffic cartels are replicating occupation strategies on a wide scale, while continuously threatening existing ones. An illustrative example is the former Federal Police Headquarters, a 23-floor skyscraper flanking the central Paisandu square, which was occupied by a narco-traffic cartel until its dramatic fire and collapse in May 2018. Movements and cartels, as two fundamentally different modalities of cultivating 'brotherhood' try to break out of reproductive cycles of deprivation. While more 'legitimate' social movements such as MSTC and traffickers both cultivate a discourse of emancipation, the latter have adopted a culture of physical violence. The emancipatory liberation discourses advocated by many social movements often go together, paradoxically, with strict rules, involving curfews, enforced participation in weekly meetings and political events, and a zero-tolerance policy regarding alcohol, drugs and crime. Cartel-organizations, on the contrary, provide more precarious and uncertain dwelling spaces, but internal regulations and demands are usually less strict, making it a commonplace dwelling 'choice' for a lot of the poorest urban denizens, who are excluded, unwanted and do not easily 'fit' elsewhere.

In addition to homeless movements' occupations, some highly visible buildings are squatted by anarchist-artistic groups, such as the eccentric Casa Amarela, a self-declared downtown 'Black Urban Quilombo'<sup>3</sup> residing in a nineteenth-century villa, or the unusual Ouvidor occupation ensconced in the State's former Headquarter of Culture, located prominently in front of the principal bus terminal Bandeiras, and inhabited by ever-changing international groups of street-artists and others who are outsiders to the city's restricted formal cultural circuits. At least tens of central theatre companies engage in occupation practices, such as the Teatro Oficina in Bixiga or the Teatro do Satyros at Praça Roosevelt (Stevens, 2015). The Largo da Batatata, the Parque Augusta, the Avendia Paulista and the notorious Minhocão viaduct were artistically 'squatted' to claim improved public spaces.

*Prototypes of a city in the making*

Central São Paulo's intricate juxtaposition of building tissues, iteratively in decay and renewal



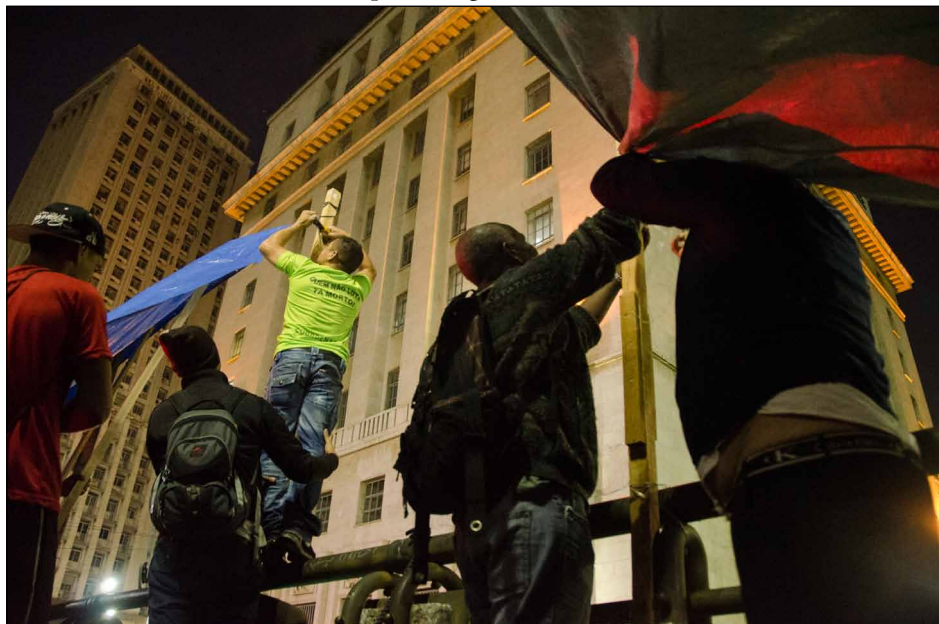
Source: Photo by author, 2016

Protest at the central Parque Anhangabau to impede Dilma's impeachment in April 2016



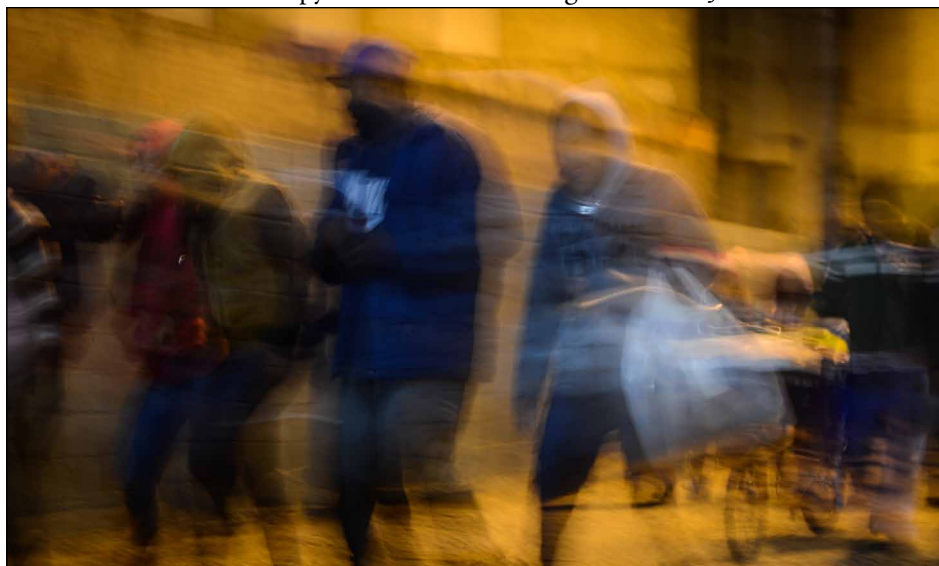
Source: Photo by author, 2016

Demonstration of FLM, the Frente de Luta por Moradia in front of the municipal town hall to protest against eviction actions.



Source: Photo by author, 2016

Members of São Paulo's FLM, the Frontline of the Housing Struggle, 'brought in movement' to occupy a downtown building at the Rua José Bonifácio



Source: Photo by author, 2017



Occupation São João 288, in one of the city's most luxurious 19th century hotels, vacated in the 1980s, and occupied in 2012 by MSTRU (Homeless Movement for Urban Reform), affiliated to FLM



Source: Photo by author, 2015

Ocupação Prestes Maia, an occupied factory building along the center's wide Prestes Maia Avenue



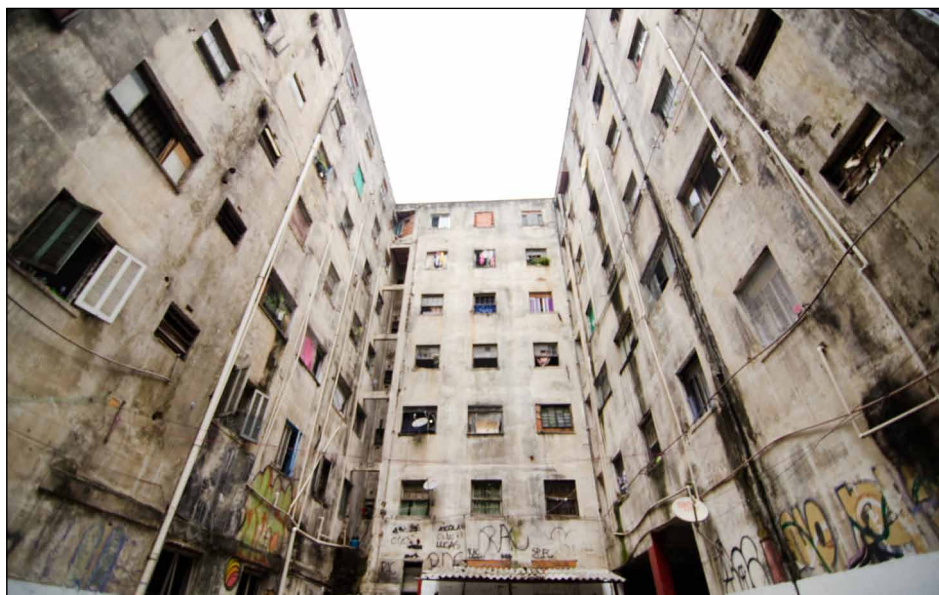
Source: Photo by author, 2016

Ocupação, North of the center, an unfinished building ruin, occupied in May, 2017 by MSTRN, the Homeless Movements of the Northern Region



Source: Photo by author, 2017

Inner courtyard of Ocupação Maua, occupied since 2007 by MMLJ, and housing 237 families



Source: Photo by author, 2017



Ocupação Rio Branco, 47, self-constructed dwelling units in a former central cinema hall



Source: Photo by author, 2018

Ocupação José Bonifácio, 137, occupied by MSTC. Plywood walls subdivide formerly open office floors



Source: Photo by author, 2016



Ocupação Ciné Maroccos, occupied by the cartel-affiliated MSTs, the Homeless Movement of São Paulo, evicted in 2017 after the discovery of a large depository of crack and weaponry.



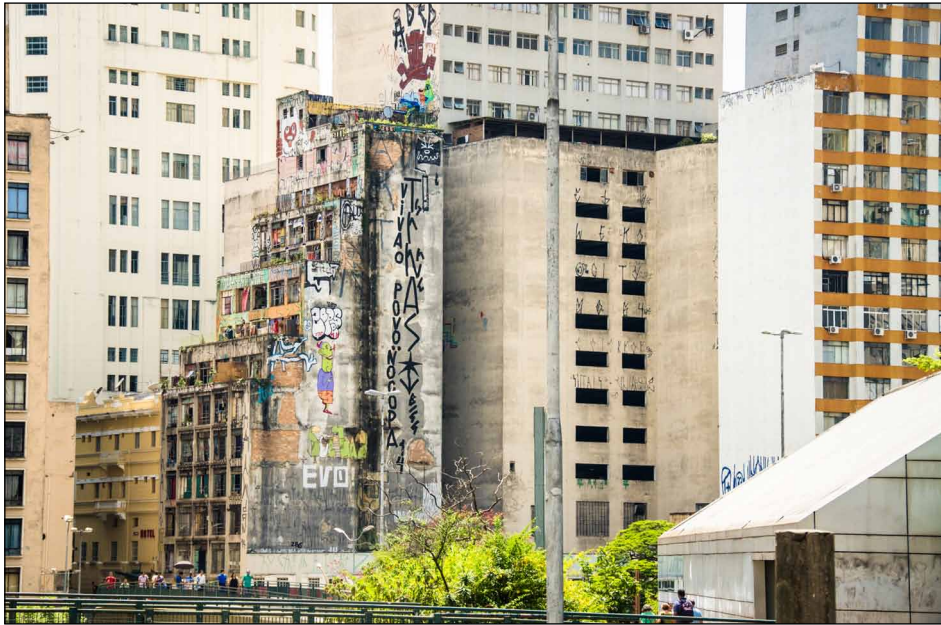
Source: Photo by author, 2016

Ocupação Antonio de Godoi, behind the Praça Paisandu, occupied by the cartel-affiliated MLSM, the Movement of Social Struggle for Housing.



Source: Photo by author, 2017

## Ocupação Ouvidor 63, squatted by artistic groups.



Source: Photo by author, 2016

## PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS ON PROTO-URBANISM

São Paulo's urbanization largely resulted from migratory processes of arrival that led to the emergence of myriad urban movements in the 1970s and 1980s. As migrant populations continuously contributed to the outwards expansion of São Paulo's urban conurbation, the city's historical downtown area was increasingly vacated due to a convergence of architectural and urbanistic, but also legal, economic and political factors. The converging increase of arrival and vacancy rates created in the center of the city a fertile ground for the proliferation of occupation movements.

During the last two decades, vacant buildings consequently became the stage of numerous occupations. They take many different forms and greatly vary in terms of aspirations, organization and political affiliation. Yet, on the whole, all of these occupation practices capitalize on the abundant availability of sound and worthy architecture, located in one of the city's most symbolic and best-served areas. Their strength often lies in smartly 'parasiting' on structures already available, vacant, and hence inviting to be given new use and meaning. Occupations are, consequently, mostly highly mobile, almost nomadic 'encampments', temporarily taking refuge in existing building shells, and making them temporary inhabitable or useful.

The amount of such small temporary interventions in the center is hard to assess. Housing occupations by organized movements can be estimated between hundred

and two hundred.<sup>4</sup> Artistic occupations come and go, but in dozens of urban sites they are structurally present. Although each occupation in itself is a micro-urban practice, a minimal and temporary use of space rather than an actual making of space, the proliferation and concentration in the old center of hundreds of such micro-interventions adds to the constitution of a more structural constellation of occupations. Separately, they offer anecdotal evidence in urbanistic terms, but together, occupations are increasingly acquiring critical mass and duration with an emerging structural agency in the improvement of the city's social and spatial realm. In their large-scale re-appropriation of the center, occupations emerge as prototypical instances of an urbanism-in-the-making by providing preliminary real-scale samples of a potential dwelling mode, capitalizing on the large availability of qualitative but temporarily vacant, and hence unused urban space.

In the miscellaneous ways in which the center's vacant urban landscape is consequently injected with new life and meaning, particular prototypes of urbanism seem to surface. 'Prototypes', here, covers multiple semiotic meanings. Prototypes are chiefly provisional and preliminary. They 'come before' and initiate. Yet at the same time, since they are only provisional, they are exploratory, experimental, potentially innovative. They result from trial and error, and have no pre-established *modus operandi*. They are fragile and precarious, they might work out well, they might collapse. They are in a test-phase. Not-yet established. Emergent, perhaps. By the same token, they are nevertheless building toward a 'type'. They are not merely experiments for the sake of artistic exploration, but aim for gradual improvement and fine-turning.

Occupations share many characteristics with such prototypes. In their peculiar spatial temporality, they could be interpreted as prototypes of an 'urbanism-in-the-making,' in which spatial development and the amelioration of the built environment is based on temporary use of built space readily available for tackling highly urgent urban challenges. Occupations emerge as prototypes of urbanism by prefiguring alternative models of collective social housing, but also of artistic production and shared urban life. Occupations emerge as prototypes of an urbanism not yet 'calibrated' or 'established', but as emergent forms of city-making still in a status *nascendi*. In urbanistic terms, they remain 'proto', try-outs on real scale, fragile and prone to eviction, criminal infiltration, and afflicted by precariousness. They provoke urbanism, in that sense, both as an established scientific field and as an urban practice to learn from such temporary urban interventions and start speculating on urbanistic paradigms rooted in ongoing dynamics and practices of movements 'out there' in the everyday of social and cultural mobilization and engagement. Urban movements, then, are arguably prototyping an urbanistic model that is still in the process of being formulated.

## NOTES

1. IPTU, 'Imposto Predial e Territorial Urbano' or 'Urban Property Tax' is a municipal property tax imposed by the Brazilian Constitutions since 1988. It allows municipalities to incrementally increase property taxes on unused buildings or land plots to stimulate real estate transactions and enforce the so-called 'social function of property'.
2. The film 'Era Hotel Cambridge', by the well-known Brazilian producer Eliane Caffé was largely filmed inside the occupation, and many occupations play prime roles. The film was launched in 2017 and gained multiple prizes. See also Caffé (2017).
3. The term 'Quilombo' originally referred to Black runaway-slave encampments in the surroundings of the city.
4. Estimation based on interviews with housing movement leaders between 2015 and 2018

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