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# Squatting as tactics for creative resistance and transformation:
## The experience of a Brazilian housing occupation

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to discuss the processes of resistance and transformation that take place in squats in Brazil and thus shed a light on potential innovative forms of producing and inhabiting the city that emerge from the articulation between inhabitants, social movements, university, activists, and public sectors in these spaces. This work is anchored in the case of a squat in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro, which provides empirical data and engages it in dialogue with the right to the city. The paper proposes to analyze the experience of squatting in Brazil through three different dimensions of potential tactics for transformation: political, urban, and social. It draws from the authors' years of active engagement with the squat and the accumulated research and teaching experience in the field of informal settlements in Rio de Janeiro. The paper aims to demonstrate that squats can be both seen and used as tactics for transformation which can lead to alternative forms of inhabiting the city that arise from insurgent and collaborative practices.

**Keywords**

Squatting, Rio de Janeiro, resistance, social movements, housing struggle

## 1. Introduction

The act of occupying empty land or buildings for housing purposes–or squatting[1]–has been present in many different contexts and moments in history around the world, not only in countries in the periphery of capitalism, but also in the central economies of the world (see Martinez, 2013). They can appear as resistance actions, alternatives for housing, and/or political tools that pressure the state and make the contradictions of the capitalist system of city production evident (Holm, 2013; Pruijt, 2013; Souza, 2006; Vasudevan, 2015).

In this sense, occupations of vacant land and buildings represent not only the sole alternative for housing for a significant part of the population, but also act as tools for assuring the right to the city (Lefebvre, 2008 [1968]). They challenge the hegemonic structures of power by evidencing the contradictions of the neoliberal system that produces empty spaces for speculation and simultaneously leaves thousands of people without access to housing (Stevens, 2019; Veríssimo, 2010).

Harvey (2000) highlights that the struggle to the right to the city is diverse and intends to propose other forms of city production, rather than the sole access to an existing uneven and exclusionary model of city. Using the right to another city (Canedo, 2017) as a main axis, this paper proposes three dimensions of analysis that do not intend to categorize squats, but rather offer possibilities of different perspectives and actions: squatting as tactics for (1) political; (2) urban; and (3) social transformation. This analysis engages with Pruijt's (2013) work on European squats that defined five different configurations of squats*: deprivation-based squatting; squatting as an alternative housing strategy; entrepreneurial squatting; conservational squatting; political squatting*. By proposing these definitions, not only does Pruijt offer a way to categorize them, but also the perspective of squats as tools for transformation, which could be perceived as the construction of Vasudevan's (2015) *alternative urbanism*.

Through the experience with the Solano Trindade squat, this paper aims to shed light on the transformative potential existing in the practices and resistance processes in Brazilian squats, focusing on how collaborative actions that involve different actors can promote innovative solutions for housing production and other forms of inhabiting the city. We understand that the actions developed in these spaces are tactics (Certeau, 1984) for alternative forms of inhabiting the city that not only criticize the hegemonic state-led urban planning and management but also offer alternatives and implement solutions that challenge the 'urban neoliberalism', thus acting as *grassroots planners* (Souza, 2006).

The article is structured into two main parts. The first part provides a broader look into the squatting scene in the Brazilian context and how it can be seen as a tool in the struggle for the right to the city. In the second part, the paper develops three categories of analysis based on the work of Pruijt (2013) through dialogue with the case of Solano Trindade. Through the in-depth experience with Solano, the authors intend to explore the

[1] The term squatting refers to a dwelling without the consent of the owner. It differs from other forms of occupation without legal title due to the focus on its political and organizatorial character, usually led or inspired by a social movement (Pruijt, 2013).

transformative potential in Brazilian squats and highlight the importance of the engagement of different actors in this process.

This work stems from a larger framework of research projects and academic activities with Solano Trindade, developed over the past seven years mainly in the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. The engagement of several research groups, professors and students in Solano's project had two main intentions. First, to provide technical support and advice to the squat, especially from the fields of architecture, urbanism, engineering and law. Second, to develop a critical approach to the hegemonic methodologies that fragment knowledge. The authors are part of this group of scholars that have been actively involved with this squat since 2014, developing different forms of academic activities (Andrade and Canedo, 2019) and providing technical assistance for the inhabitants and the broader social movement, supporting them in their struggle to remain on the occupied land and to collectively build a different city model.

### 1.1 Immersion – methods and tools

This article is structured on the understanding that interventions in popular spaces demand the participation of the residents as subjects not only through the transformations they carry out, but also through the knowledge they produce. Thus, our work as researchers and technical advisors in the Solano Trindade squat has been based on a dialogical process analogous to the idea of participant research (Silva and Silva, 1986), situating and instrumentalizing the actors for decision making, as well as immersing ourselves in their socio-spatial realities to experience and understand the motivations of their urban and housing needs. As suggested by Latour (2007) and Santos (2007), among other authors, this immersion was important for the establishment of the analysis categories, highlighted throughout the paper.

The engagement of the authors with Solano Trindade started in 2014 with the demand of the National Movement of Struggle for Housing (MNLM) – responsible for the organization of the occupation – for technical support in the implementation of the squat. There was already an established working group between MNLM and the naMORAR research group – to which the authors belong– as well as other research groups from UFRJ, from previous experiences. It represented a long-term process of cooperation and active participation that involved different activities over the past years. Some examples of the activities developed by the authors are intensive immersion with students, like the ten-day international workshop held in cooperation with German universities, as well as several courses offered in the Faculty of Architecture, where students spent months working with topics related to the demands and needs of the inhabitants of Solano as well as in accordance with the goals of MNLM.[2]

The activities realized in the Solano Trindade context, with the participation of several actors, provided the basis of the analysis proposed in this paper. This immersive and

[2] For more detailed information about the developed activities see Andrade and Canedo (2019) or visit the squat's website https://solanotrindademnlm.wordpress.com/

intensive approximation of the authors with the presented case enables a deeper and more complex understanding of the dynamics present in this reality. The active participation in the empirical field is crucial to minimize the distortions caused by generalizations and top-down assumptions that have been historically hegemonic in scientific production (Latour, 1991; Santos, 2007).

The in-depth involvement of the researchers and the research actors also brought challenges and in several times the lines between researcher/ activist/ citizen were blurred (Desai, 2013; Juris & Khasnabish, 2013). But it also provided an opportunity to experiment and reframe the role of researchers in the field, bringing different approaches to the empirical material.

In the next section, the paper will provide a broad view on the squatting scene in the Brazilian context and how it can be understood from the perspective of struggles towards the right to the city. In the following section we will use the case of Solano as a guideline to discuss three different categories of analysis that intend to propose squatting as complex tools for societal transformation.

## 2. Squats in Brazil as tools for the right to the city

As in most of the cities from the so-called Global South[3], inequality and poverty have historically been shaping the urban development in Rio de Janeiro (Alves et al., 2008; Leitão, 2008; Rocco et al., 2019). In general terms, the state plays an important role in reproducing and aggravating these inequalities, either by its negligence or through intentional actions and policies that instead of tackling the major urban problems of the impoverished communities, aim to favor powerful private sectors (Maricato, 2017). In this context, the struggle for housing assumes a central role in the poor population's fight for subsistence (Martins, 2012; Souza, 2006).

In this context, and especially since the 1970s, the presence of organized urban social movements like housing struggle movements has been a central actor in the struggle for amplification of the citizenship of the poor population and for the redemocratization of Brazil, that from 1964 to 1985 was under a military dictatorship (Kovarick, 1986; Maricato, 2011). The demands and struggles of these movements were crucial for the development of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution that incorporated progressive aspects such as the right to the city and decent housing for all citizens.

These movements gained strength after redemocratization and it was only in the 1990s that social movements started to use the occupation of empty buildings as a strategy in the struggle for decent housing in central areas of Brazil's main cities. Although this strategy is more prominent in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, as well as their metropolitan regions, the squatting movement is not restricted to these major centers (Buonfiglio, 2007; Faganello and Guedes, 2016; among others). Squatting vacant buildings in central and infrastructured areas of the two major cities in Brazil has been an attempt to reveal the dissatisfaction of poor

[3] For the complex debate around Global South and North world division see Yiftachel (2020)

communities in the "seemingly inexorable fate of exile in the de-urbanized periphery and favelas" (Maricato as cited in Santos, 2002, p. 33).

The expelling of the poor communities to the periphery is related to processes of gentrification and valorization of central and infrastructured areas in the cities but is also reaffirmed by public housing policies that have historically focused on producing social housing in far-away peripheries (Royer, 2014; Veríssimo, 2010; Rolnik, 2010). Contradicting this policy, in many cases the number of vacant buildings exceeds the number of homeless people or those living in significant precarious conditions (Rolnik, 2010). In 2008, while the national housing deficit was 5.5 million residences, there were about 7.7 million empty houses in the country (Veríssimo, 2010).

In this precarious context, in most cases the access to home becomes urgent and the main goal of many poor Brazilian families. The political and ideological dimension that in the European context play a key role (Martinez, 2013; Pruijt 2013), is often hidden under the major urge for the basic need for shelter in the Brazilian context. The importance of an organized social movement struggle lies in the potential to overcome individual needs and to focus on the broader picture, fighting for a political transformation that will prevent others from facing the same issues in the future.

The basis of social movements' struggles is to create a political consciousness among the *directly oppressed*, those who have been historically so focused on their daily battles for survival that they cannot see any alternative outside the same system that is responsible for their own oppression (Santos, 2006). Therefore, squats organized by social movements[4] in Brazil have long defined occupation as an important political tool, beyond the mere access to a shelter (Cymbalista, 2020; Lago, 2011; Mello, 2014; Souza, 2006; Souza, 2015; Stevens, 2019;). In this sense, they can be interpreted as the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1968) put into practice.

Lefebvre's (1968) debates around the right to the city have been vastly related and tied to the housing struggle social movements in Brazil (Stevens 2009; Trindade, 2017; among others). In this paper, we are interested in the idea that Lefebvre didn't intend to advocate for the right to the existing capitalist city, but instead the right to build another city (Harvey, 2000). According to Harvey (2000) the imagination of other forms of inhabiting the city proposed by Lefebvre (1968) cannot occur without an anti-capitalist movement that focuses on the transformation of urban daily life as its main goal. The potential of the Brazilian squatting scene, therefore lies in small revolutionary acts present in these urban movements that can lead to broader revolutionary processes (Harvey, 2000). The right to the city can also be expanded as the right to produce and invent the city, understanding it as a product of the working class (Harvey, 2000).

The process of squatting buildings and land in Brazil occurs therefore, on the one hand, as a struggle from poor people in extreme need, organized or not (Mello, 2014), to find a house or a shelter. On the other hand, it occurs as a political movement that demonstrates

[4] Social Movements here are understood as organized groups that critically oppose the status quo, promoting organized public actions focused on specific demands related to a broader political struggle (Souza, 2013)

to society the contradictions in the neoliberal system that produces '*so many shelters and so many shelterless*' (Andrade, 2013). This is made evident by the slogan of the popular movements for the housing struggle in Brazil that states: 'If housing is a right, occupying is a duty'.[5] Had the poor not occupied vacant buildings and land, the processes of accumulation by real estate agents would probably have occurred even more intensely (Maricato, 2011).

This section provided an overview of the squatting scene in the Brazilian context and how it is embedded within the struggle for the right to the city. In the next section we will discuss three different dimensions of squats through the case of Solano Trindade. Although anchored in one experience, we believe that these categories can be useful for understanding the complexity of housing struggles in other contexts.

## 3. Squats as transformation tools

Beyond the struggle for the right to the city, we argue that squats can be understood as tools for political, social and urban transformation and therefore propose other forms of inhabiting the city and societal transformation. We develop this argument in dialogue with our seven-year research and activist experience with Solano Trindade, a squat in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

### 3.1 Solano Trindade: experimentations through collaborative work

In 2014, a group of around 50 people –among them members of social movements, families and activists demanding housing– and organized by the MNLM with support from different research groups from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ)[6] occupied a 50,000 square meter plot of public land that had been abandoned for over ten years. This area is in Duque de Caxias, a city in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro where precarious settlements and low-income housing projects are located.

The occupation is part of MNLM's tactics that use squatting to not only assure housing for vulnerable people, but also to pressure the state to provide public policies to guarantee accessible and appropriate housing for Brazilians (Lago, 2011). Moreover, MNLM's political project is the de-commodification of the city and the development of alternative and collective forms of living that include self-managed and self-sustained neighborhoods, where the projects of housing, education and income generation are intertwined (Mello, 2014).

Named after the poet and black activist Solano Trindade, this occupation is one of several organized by this social movement in other cities around Brazil. The occupied area had some existing single-floor buildings, but only one of them was partially inhabitable as

[5] In portuguese: 'se morar é um direito, ocupar é um dever'

[6] The different research groups from UFRJ involved in the work of Solano Trindade are: naMORAR, Observatório das Metrópoles, NAJUP, LEAU, MUDA, SOLTEC and NIDES. Besides UFRJ, other universities were also involved in several moments since 2014: Unigranrio, TU-Berlin, BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg and Potsdam Fachhoschule. Several collectives and activists' groups are also part of the project: Catálise collective of technical assistance, the above-mentioned research groups and the architecture offices Matéria Base, MUTA, Fresta and Estúdio Guanabara) and Rua (anticapitalist Youth).

shelter (see Figure 1). A second building was initially in no condition to be occupied but is now being refurbished so that it can be converted into 12 houses. The third one was appropriated several years ago by the city of Duque de Caxias and functions as a state primary school.

Despite being situated in an urban area, the dimension and features of the land present an interesting potential to combine both urban and rural aspects of the housing issue. The buildings are situated in a large area with a great portion of green land near an environmental preservation area (São Bento APA) as pictured in Figure 2.

Since the occupation, inhabitants, movements and their partners have developed several projects that involve architectural reconfigurations of existing spaces, agricultural initiatives, ecological sanitation systems, new constructions for housing and collective activities, implementation of equipment such as a playground for the children (see Figure 3), and other activities, such as cleaning of the area, partial renovation of the roof and temporary hydraulic installations.

**Figure 1**

Abandoned building at Solano Trindade. **Source: Photo by André Mantelli**

**Figure 2**

Solano Trindade. **Source: Photo by Priscila Xavier**

**Figure 3**

Playground built with students at Solano Trindade. **Source: Photo by Priscila Xavier**

Due to the precariousness of the occupied building, it is not possible to shelter many families with minimal living conditions. Therefore, there are currently only seven families living in Solano, but the goal of MNLM is to build around 150 new houses for low-income people from the neighborhood. The project aims to build those houses collectively, respecting the different aspects of each family, and developing a self-sustained and long-term project. For that purpose, they plan to apply the acquired technical knowledge from the past 10 years of exchange with the university.

Since 2014 the authors and a large group of scholars, researchers, architects, engineers and others have been working closely with Solano Trindade providing technical advising, developing student and community workshops and courses in a process of knowledge exchange. This experience has brought us to reflect on the transformative potential of this model of housing struggle. Based on these experiences and exchange of knowledge, the following section proposes three dimensions for analyzing the squats as tactics for building other forms of thinking and relating to the city: squatting as a tactic for political, spatial and social transformation.

### 3.2 Squatting as tactic for political transformation

Squatting is a political act regardless of how it is organized, the actors involved, and its goals and contexts. It is a response to the processes of exclusion of groups of residents in the neoliberal production of cities, whether simply by ideology, need or both (Pruijt, 2013). In Pruijt's (2013) classification of different typologies of squats in the European context, he defined *political squatting* as those which were 'driven by an ulterior anti-systemic political motive' (Pruijt, 2013, p. 44). Although he recognizes that all squatting actions are political by their essence, the author presents inner conflicts amidst the squatting movement between

those in the 'political squats' and those in the 'non-political' squats. The non-political squats are those which were driven mainly by goals other than the struggle against the state and the hegemonic system.

In the Brazilian context these differences are blurrier than in Europe. For starters, not all squats are organized through a social movement or politically organized groups (Mello, 2014). Most of the inhabitants of squats – or squatters – are people in extreme need of affordable and dignified housing. Nevertheless, it is notable that many of these groups find themselves involved in political acts or in the political struggle after they start living in the occupation (Martins, 2012; Moreira, 2016; Stevens, 2019).

The urgent necessity for housing is clearly the main motivation for most Brazilian squatters, even those in long-term relationships with social movements. A large number of people who squat to obtain housing were not previously politically engaged with organized housing and urban social movement struggles, although they were developing their own daily fight for survival, for housing and for other needs, which is also political (Zhang, 2020).

In Solano Trindade, most of the dwellers reported that they did not have much knowledge about their rights or the housing struggle in general before getting involved in Solano's project. It was through the social movement and by living there that they started to become aware and to engage in broader struggles, understanding themselves as political actors. After seven years of this project, we can observe that even when people's individual circumstances remain important, collective conditions take priority and it becomes easier to mobilize groups. This is not a particularity of Solano, it can be noted in several other different experiences where social movements were involved, as is the case of São Paulo, a city in Brazil with a long-term history of housing struggles and collaborative self-managed projects (Lago, 2011; Stevens, 2019; Zhang, 2020).

Despite a greater or lesser awareness of rights and the stigma of non-political mobilization, the history of the poor population in Brazil is marked by struggles to improve the conditions of their living space, either by organizing through social movements, collectives or associations to pressure the state or by creating individual solutions to address their immediate problems. Identifying that these practices are always reactions to the exclusionary system in which the working class is inserted, is crucial to understand the political dimension of the struggle even when the demands are not clearly posed by the communities (Canedo, 2017).

Each struggle has its own particularity, however. The involvement of different engaged actors such as social movements promotes a broader connection to grassroots movements that have been finding new ways of combining local activism and global actions (Appadurai, 2001). The political dimension of squatting can also be regarded in terms of its influences on and dialogues with public policies. The role of civil society, especially in the case of organized social movements, is not only to criticize the state, but to develop actions that will constantly pressure it, sometimes by providing alternatives that intend to shed light on viable public policies that should be adopted but in many cases are intentionally ignored (Souza, 2006).

Since the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, there have been considerable articulations between housing struggles and the construction of democratizing instruments for urban policy. In the first decade of the century, the efforts towards urban reform resulted in the enactment of the City Statute (2009) and, during the first governments of the Workers' Party (2003-2016), in the creation of the Ministry of Cities and relevant policies that were developed. With regard to housing issues, a course of action that favored popular participation in the redesigning of cities was conceived. This project aimed to create housing spaces that were better integrated into the urban, in addition to improving precarious areas and rehabilitating occupied buildings.

However, pressures from national and international real estate markets that guided the financialization of housing, combined with the economic crisis in Europe and the US in 2008, stimulated a conservative turn in the model for dealing with the housing problem. As a result, in an attempt to prevent the crisis from affecting the Brazilian economy, a counter-cyclical program of massive housing production was initiated, following the example of Chile and Mexico (Amore et al., 2015; Cardoso et al. 2016).

The "Minha Casa Minha Vida" program (PMCMV – My House My Life) initially aimed at building new houses for low-income communities through a partnership with the private sector, in which private corporations would be responsible for buying the land, designing, building, and selling housing units. Different levels of public power would be responsible for defining minimal parameters, approving the projects, and funding both the Developers and the impoverished community when it came to financing the purchase of housing (Amore et al., 2015; Cardoso et al. 2016). Under the current neoliberal model, the state often abandons its "power" to regulate and produce the city in the hands of private actors (Souza, 2006), as we can very clearly observe in the PMCMV case.

Social movements saw in this model a clear reproduction of the exclusionary way cities have been developed in Brazil, and as a result of their demands, an addition to PCMV was made: Minha Casa Minha Vida Entidades (My House My Life Entities). This provided social movements and organized dweller associations with access to public funding to develop their own housing projects. It created an alternative to the real estate market offers which are often regulated by interests of powerful groups rather than those of the poor population in need of housing (Amore et al., 2015; Cardoso et al. 2016; Royer, 2014).

Social movements believed they would now have the possibility to access funding to implement their collective and participatory way of housing production. In reality, in order to access the funding, several concessions had to be made by the movements, which were required to adapt their projects to the rigid models offered by the state. This provoked tension in social movements since their political leadership was reduced to the role of project managers and their autonomy in decision-making was very limited. Furthermore, the amount of funding allocated to the PMCMV-Entidades was insignificant in comparison to the billions of reais invested in the program over the past years. However, it corresponded to absolute values which had never before been destined to self-managed housing production in Brazil (Lago, 2011).

In this context, the experience in Solano Trindade represents the possibility of criticism and the proposal of alternatives to this model. However, the inaccessibility to other sources of funds for construction threatened the non-hegemonic design that had started the project. Paradoxically, it was only with the end of funding for the program[7] that it was possible to develop most of the improvements and transformations in the squat.

The actions developed in the Solano Trindade Occupation can be regarded as part of the development of Appadurai's "deep democracy" (2001). In the neoliberal context, civil society's participation in the decisions and production of space have been increasingly obliterated. Both Lefebvre's right to the city and the one asserted in the Brazilian Constitution defend that urban inhabitants should be active actors in all the processes of city development. As stated by Purcell (2002), the inhabitants should be empowered. How and who is to be empowered however, is still subject of debate. The author argues that there should be a transformation – a *rescaling* – of the democratic structures of participation that considers the different dimensions of citizens and citizenships.

In this sense, merely accessing or entering existing democratic structures is not enough to provide the right to the city. Despite the counter-hegemonic aspect of squatting that in many cases produces radical alternatives of inhabiting the city, it is important to note that these practices can also be both a product and a reproduction of the capitalist logic.

In this section we have approached three dimensions of squats which we consider possible tools for a political transformation. The first aspect is the politization of the individuals and the groups themselves through the act of squatting. The second, the conflicts and articulations with public policies that can occur either intentionally or not. And the third one is the construction of an alternative and deep democracy (de Souza, 2006; Appadurai, 2001). In the following section we will discuss how squatting can be seen as a tactic for spatial transformation.

### 3.3 Squatting as a tactic for urban and spatial transformation

By defining the *conservational squats* as a typology that intends to use squatting as a tactic for the preservation of the cityscape, Pruijt (2013) raised the issue of the spatial dimension of squatting actions. According to Pruijt's analysis, squats did not act merely in order to preserve a specific building or set of buildings, but also to rethink the use of these buildings in the city under constant transformation. It is common that previously empty occupied buildings were initially not intended as housing, instead they could have been hospitals, factories, and schools. As such, once these buildings are squatted, residents must also adapt the space for housing purposes, opening up new possibilities of inhabitation to the occupants.

In the case of Solano Trindade, as occurs in most of the occupations in Brazil, the first challenge was to provide the minimum means to inhabit, such as water supply, energy and rehabilitated indoor spaces. Additionally, security is an important issue in the occupation

[7] Since 2019, President Jair Bolsonaro is in power and there is no more funding available for the MCMV-E

process and after its implementation. At first, squatters feel the need to protect themselves from police intervention and afterwards there are other actors interested in occupying empty land with the intention of illegally selling it to poor people. This is a reality that is very well known by the inhabitants in the peripheral cities in Brazil. In Solano Trindade, since its occupation, the dwellers have encountered several different threats from paramilitary groups known as 'militias' (Zaluar et al., 2007).

After the occupation was settled and the most urgent matters were solved, it was possible to start building other structures that could reflect the view of the collective lifestyle defended by MNLM and corroborated by the dwellers. At the same time as the existing buildings were adapted to work as housing for the families, a collective kitchen and bathrooms were built, as well as a space for meetings and collective activities that are fundamental for the organization of the group. Later, a library was organized, and the remaining collective spaces were slowly equipped to function as places for gathering. Other projects are currently under development.

More than a simple architectural matter, understanding squatting as tactics for urban and spatial transformation requires a broader understanding of urban planning and its actors. 'Urban planning is (…) an attempt to change spatial organization and social relations in the city' (Souza, 2006, p. 328). This definition makes it clear that there is a diversity of actors and forms of urban planning being developed that are not reduced to the official and institutional state-led practices.

Social movements often go beyond providing basic needs that should be guaranteed by the state. They have been developing creative and radical alternatives that question the capitalist model of social-spatial relationships (Souza, 2006). Therefore, civil society and its organized practices in urban space, as in the case of squats, should be seen as central actors in urban planning development (Souza, 2006).

Recognizing the legitimacy of the production of space through insurgent actions by urban impoverished communities has a transformative potential in the urban planning and development approach (Miraftab, 2009). By acknowledging and making the agency of actors in the spaces of poverty in the Global South visible, we can alter the hegemonic perception of these spaces as places for the reproduction of exclusion, inequality and precarity, thus developing a *subaltern urbanism* (Roy, 2009). Souza (2006) names these actions 'grassroots urban planning'. These authors identify that the territorialization and spatialization of these struggles provide a fruitful field for experimentation, where the materiality of the spaces reflect alternative forms of living. Therefore, the occupations not only challenge the exclusionary capitalist model of access to housing, but they propose alternative ways of living, working, and socializing. And all of these require suitable spaces that are constructed, planned and transformed collectively for such purposes (Vasudevan, 2015).

In the case of Solano Trindade, the university, especially research groups from urban studies, architecture and engineering fields were close collaborators. It was thus possible to go deep into the development of innovative solutions that reflected the ideological and anti-capitalist goals of the social movement, attended to the emergent needs of the inhabitants,

and worked as a praxis for experimental field work where students, researchers and professors could apply and test their knowledge. The work developed in Solano Trindade comes from the understanding that planning and design are processes which are not concluded with an architectural, engineering or urban design project. Furthermore, this collaborative work is grounded in the idea of exchanging different types of knowledge, therefore acknowledging and valuing non-technical and non-hegemonic knowledges and creating a field of mutual learning for all actors involved.

One example that synthesizes this particular collaborative model is the *Experimental Cities Factory*, a building that was redesigned to be a training center and serve not only the squatters but also the neighborhood.[8] The proposal is to offer several courses in different areas, including in the field of architecture and civil engineering and at the same time experiment with alternative technologies and manufacture different building components to support the execution of popular housing in an educational and emancipatory space. The self-managed aspect of the project increases the potential for innovation even with limited resources.

Also related to the concept of the *Experimental Cities Factory*, is the conversion of an existing building in Solano Trindade into 12 apartments for future inhabitants.[9] The building refurbishing project, developed by the residents, adopted a series of alternative technologies aimed at producing social, ecological, and economically sustainable environments. Among the alternatives adopted, ecological sanitation solutions stand out, such as the Evapotranspiration Basin, and the use of compacted earth blocks (BTC), that use earth from the land to produce bricks for the construction of the walls of the new housing units.

Besides providing alternative ways of inhabiting and producing urban spaces and ways of life, squats can act to pressure public policies for urban transformations in the city. An example is the struggle of social movements against major urban renewal projects that are often related to mass evictions (Holm, 2013). This engages with the *conservational squats* typology defined by Pruijt (2013). Although this can be seen in most places around the world with squatting movements, the dichotomic relationship between public policies and occupations takes on different aspects of the Brazilian reality. The socioeconomic context, the (lack of) participation of civil society and the organization of resistance movements are deeply related to how squatting takes place.

The disputes over territory for housing and access to services, and even more for the autonomy of collective construction and the right to inhabit the city, are often unfair and unequal, especially in the Brazilian reality (Souza, 2006). However, it is from these movements of struggle and resistance, whether organized or the sum of individual rebel initiatives, that the pressure to alter public policies becomes possible.

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[8] The building is under construction and uses a wooden structure from the former Polytechnic Institute of UFRJ in Cabo Frio (IPUFRJ) donated by UFRJ after the deactivation of activities in the building in 2017. A crowdfunding carried out in 2017 and hours of working by inhabitants, students and technicians are the resources for this construction to happen.

[9] This refurbishment is currently being developed using funding from a Parliamentary Amendment and with a Crowdfunding developed at the beginning of 2021.

These strategies show us that besides looking at these spaces as solutions to spatial and social problems, we see in them potential for experimenting with other ways of relating to the built space. They offer opportunities to rethink housing spaces, temporary uses, overlapping uses, flexible spaces, and neighborhood negotiation processes for collective transformation of individual spaces. There are many elements present in squatting that could be used as tools for intervention and comprehension of urban spaces and the city in general.

In this section we discussed how besides political actions, squats can be used or observed as urban interventions (Martínez, 2013) and tools for transforming the built space. This transformation can occur within the scope of urban space and also at the scale of the housing unit. It can serve as an element of preservation and resistance to an imposed urban transformation model, or as an innovation, in the sense of thinking about new uses and forms of appropriation of pre-existing spaces. (Pruijt, 2013). In this sense, a renovation of urbanism as a discipline from the perspective of these practices is necessary (Andrade & Canedo, 2020; Stevens, 2019). In the following section we will explore the potential for social transformation within squatting and how it can contribute to building alternative futures. (Vasudam, 2015; Stevens, 2019)

### 3.4 Squatting as tactic for social transformation

Vasudevan (2015) views the occupation movements as a collective act of 'world-making', through an alternative understanding of city life. For him, the occupants' practices are configured as a 'radical makeshift urbanism'. Seeing the possibility of urban transformation in occupations can be a way of experimentation and paradigm shifting for city dwellers. Squats can be spaces where one can imagine and experience alternative worlds, express solidarity, explore new identities and intimacies, experience and share feelings, and live autonomously (Vasudevan, 2015).

It is noteworthy that even in squats with ideals of collectivity and anti-systemic resistance on an everyday basis such as Solano Trindade, the collective and alternative lifestyle does not come naturally or in a linear way. The process of proposing a different form of inhabiting and relating to the city is conflicted and often confronts the general goals of the social movement and the emergent needs and beliefs of the individuals who are part of it. Especially in the context of poor communities in Brazil, where individualism – introjected by the hegemonic system – and solidarity and collectivity – imposed by the daily life – are often intertwined (Santos, 1981).

An example of these conflicting dynamics in Solano is the project of the collective kitchen. The idea of having a collective kitchen that could be used as a political space as well as possible source of income for the squat, helping them become self-sustainable, was one of the principal ideas of MNLM for Solano Trindade from the beginning. In fact, it is common that occupations start with some form of collective kitchen in order to ensure the possibility of cooking and therefore surviving in spaces where there are usually no previous individual and/or functional spaces for that purpose. Such was the case in Solano. After the

**Figure 4**
Collective kitchen in the beginning of the occupation. **Source: Photo by André Mantelli**

occupation, one of the first activities was to organize a space where they could – at that initial time, and under very precarious conditions – prepare food for all occupants (see Figure 4).

Despite the intentions of the social movement, one of the main wishes of the inhabitants from the beginning was to have their own individual space to cook for each family. It is important to mention that cooking is a particularly important cultural activity in Brazil (Lima et al., 2015). To meet these demands, once they could divide the internal space of the existing building into 'housing units'[10], individual spaces for cooking were provided in each one of the ten housing spaces.

The collective kitchen project is still in progress, but it is at the moment focused on events like workshops or students' activities when a large number of visitors come to Solano. In these moments, the cooks manage the kitchen and prepare food that is then sold to the guests, generating income for the community (see Figure 5).

Besides being a possible source of income, the development of the collective kitchen as a social space strengthens the social relations in the community (Martínez, 2013). This project was also an opportunity to engage in the debate about food security and production, also introducing the idea of vegetarian and vegan diets for the inhabitants.[11]

[10] The existing building was originally made for institutional, not residential, use. The continued absence of individual bathrooms today is due to insufficient water and sanitation installations, meaning that bathrooms are collective.
[11] As part of the research group MUDA/UFRJ, a series of workshops were developed with the cooks to teach them how to produce vegan and vegetarian plates and also how to identify local edible plants.


**Figure 5**
Collective Kitchen today. **Source: Photo by Thamires Costa**

The debate around production and consumption of healthy and affordable food is something that has been present in social movements, mainly led, or influenced by the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra* (MST-Movement of the Workers Without Land). MST is the largest and most important social movement in Brazil and is organized by rural workers. In the past decades they have defended rural reform by occupying unproductive rural land and making it productive. In the past years, with the increased use of pesticides in the agrobusiness production, they h ave focused on the production of organic food as the foundation for their political action and discourse (Robles, 2019).

This struggle has also been incorporated by urban social movements, such as MNLM, showing that the movements exchange and support themselves by creating 'networks of mobilization from below' (Appadurai, 2001) – which is also connected to other struggles: gender, racism, and income, among others.

Pruijt (2013) states that occupations are not just intended to meet housing needs. They are part of an urban movement that opposes the dominant political and economic system. Even if people's political engagement starts with the need for housing, many people will later participate in other struggles and begin to act more strongly as political actors.

Besides the urban and political transformation, in the squats we see a possibility to think of alternative ways of living. They can be used to amplify the discussion of housing beyond shelter and the debate about center and centrality, urbanity, thinking beyond the location of job possibilities, services and leisure. Lefebvre (1994) and Harvey (2000) demonstrate the importance of urban space in the context of housing and the city as a space for encounters and confrontation. Conflicts, needs and creativity create a melting-pot where new ways of living and creating relationships are reinvented daily (Certeau, 1984). Rather than seeking to transform and conform these relationships to the standards of capitalist society, we can

understand the experiences in squats as possibilities for overcoming the individualistic neoliberal capitalist way of life and propose more collective forms of living.

## 4. Closing arguments: creating a collaborative learning environment towards the right to another city

Informal housing solutions have to some extent shaped the urban development of many Brazilian cities. History shows that many of the demands of social struggles have been incorporated into public policies. Despite that, the fragility of these additions can be perceived as a reflection of the difficulty to develop state policies in a country that is still subject to the coloniality of power, being and knowledge (Ballestrin, 2014) whilst having such a vast territory.

In this context, social movements and groups of individuals have been finding alternative ways not only to guarantee their access to basic needs, but also to offer 'potential spaces of departure to imagine alternative urban futures' (Stevens, 2019, p. 148). These struggles can be seen as the 'right to the city' (Lefebvre, 2008 [1968]) put into practice (Harvey, 2000; Marcuse, 2009; Souza, 2006).

Beyond that, through the case of Solano Trindade, the paper argues that the act and practice of squatting in Brazil can develop tools and experiences that are able produce concrete transformations in the urban and social spaces towards the right to another city (Canedo, 2017). The incorporation of different actors, like universities and social movements contributes to the development of innovative and socially responsible radical urban practices (Marcuse, 2009). The possibility of engaging with other institutional partners that may have some influence within the official system increases the capability of these inhabitants to achieve their aims and goals (Appadurai, 2001).

Therefore, more than a struggle for housing access or urban reform, we see in these experiences the development of empowerment processes for autonomy (Souza, 2006) that promote fissures in the structure of the capitalist system that may contribute to its collapse as they become more recurrent.

For this work we proposed three different lenses to observe and act collectively in the squatting scene: squats as tactics for political, spatial and social transformation. We argued that squats can be used as tactics for building other forms of inhabiting that are more connected to the needs of the population, but that can also produce innovative solutions through the exchange of different types of knowledge and struggles. The case of Solano illustrates how this complex network of actions, actors, interests, and goals faces many limitations that cannot be underestimated, but at the same time may offer alternatives that challenge the hegemonic system of housing and city production.

Despite that, it is important to be aware of the equal potential of maintaining an imposing and standardizing system of city production, which has historically favored world elites. In Rio de Janeiro squats and other spaces of low-income dwelling were fostered and tolerated by the elites and the state during different moments in history, precisely because

they served the interests of the hegemonic power, acting as a supply of cheap labor and thus contributing to the maintenance of these groups' privileges at the expense of the impoverished community. The political engagement and awareness brought by social movements described above intend to confront these complex aspects of the housing issue in Brazil.

It is important to emphasize that the current political crisis in Brazil and the extreme neoliberal right-wing government pose many difficulties for social movements' struggles in general. The lack of funding and support as well as the marginalization of the struggle led by the different political spheres in Brazil represent a step back in the achievements of the past decades when the Workers Party occupied the Federal Government (2003–2016). The recent Covid-19 pandemic has also heavily impacted the squatters in Brazil and added to the escalation in precarity of the most vulnerable communities.

Nevertheless, as stated by one of the leaders of the MNLM, this moment also provides a certain freedom to create innovative solutions that do not have to follow strict institutional regulations. We do not wish to romanticize this extremely difficult moment in history, but recognize that it can, in some respects, be an opportunity for the development of other spaces and urban models or ways of life that are more inclusive, socially just and made by the civil society.

It is not simply the struggle for the right to the city, but rather to another kind of city. A more egalitarian one, with less socio-spatial segregation, and one that is not a commodity. It is not limited to the right to be close to services and opportunities, but rather, it is about autonomy, the right to mobility, the right to experimentation of other forms of inhabiting. These collective forms of spatial development led by the urban poor, but with the deep engagement of different actors has produced other ways of relating to one another, the creation of another kind of urbanism and the creation of another city, one that is built daily by its citizens.

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