

URBAN SQUATTING AS A COUNTER-HEGEMONIC STRUGGLE IN BRAZIL
OCUPAÇÕES URBANAS COMO LUTAS CONTRA-HEGEMÔNICAS NO BRASIL
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Abstract

This paper aims to present urban squatting in the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte (RMBH), southeastern Brazil, as a counter-hegemonic struggle. We argue that the squatters' practices go beyond providing housing for those in need and demanding institutionally regulated rights and, instead, their struggles include and engage with a broad range of other locally constituted dimensions, equally necessary to accomplish real changes in life and society. We substantiate this assumption by means of a comprehensive theoretical framework, focused on spatial control as a form of power strategy. This framework includes a critical view of traditional urban planning, institutionalised participation and self-management processes. Also, given that most studies on the subject relate to cases in the Global North, the proposed analysis contributes to expanding perspectives from the South. The view of squatting in this Metropolitan Region as a specific form of counter-hegemonic architecture is justified by a consistent opposition to the naturalized idea of squatters as dangerous trespassers, and their practices as unjustifiable crimes. Methodologically, this paper presents a critical analysis of data obtained by the author during her doctoral research, based on the connections between squatters' practices and the production of their own, alternative spaces, the squatters' capacity to create and promote prefigurative policies, and the collective and quotidian character found in processes of self-management. We conclude that squatting in the RMBH goes beyond the denial of imposed forms of socioeconomic relations or modes of production, and also implies a refusal of how space is controlled, distributed, organized, and owned.

Keywords: Counter-hegemony; Squatting; Spatial Practices; Prefigurative Policies; Self-management

1 Introduction

As proposed by Gibbons (2019), hegemony exists when a rule is enforced over a (subaltern) group through a balance of power and consent. While following this assertion, this paper also acknowledges the complex possibilities and intricacies of power relations that, as suggested by Foucault (1982), cannot be simply understood as violence or consensus – although these may be instruments or results of power relations. The author believes that behind these explicit or tacitly accepted rules, written laws, or unspoken codes of social conduct, there is a much more complex and subtle dimension, which occurs at various scales, from individuals to populations, at the level of everyday actions. In other words, how some actions modify others. Power only exists whether in action.

In a correlated manner we assume that space should not be thought of as merely a physical and inert base on which one lives, circulates, and interacts. On the contrary, we agree on Lefebvre's (1991, p. 26) notion of social space as a social product that "also serves as a tool of thought and action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power." Souza's (2006) considerations of space as a product and a conditioner of social relations at the same time also substantiate some of the arguments in the following sections.

By its articulations, openings and closures, circulations, and interruptions, and in its locations, settlements, and zonings, space becomes crucial for the way we live and how we act toward ourselves and others and, in this sense, to the configuration of power relations. Traditional urban planning has historically taken advantage of the correlation between space and power, or spatial organization and control, in a heteronomous and hegemonic way, from top to bottom, in a clearly asymmetrical power relation. Space thus produced serves as a tool of power that benefits the interests of neoliberal governments and the dominating classes, to the detriment of the less favored.

Such a heteronomous production of urban spaces – and ultimately of contemporary cities – does not necessarily imply a direct or clear imposition of certain spatial forms, locations, and flows: Institutionalized participatory processes, extensively criticized in urban studies literature (see for example Lefebvre, 2016; M. Martínez López, 2011; M. A. Martínez López, 2013; Milagres, 2016; Souza, 2006), not rarely operate as mock exercises of direct democracy and, while there is the apparent involvement of the general population in decision-making processes, the neoliberal status quo remains comfortably secured.

There is, though, the possibility that institutionalised participatory processes may present certain advantages (such as the availability of public budget and plenty of technical resources) that could contribute to a more democratic production of city spaces. It is no coincidence that many urban social movements that struggle for social justice have historically advocated for more inclusive, accessible, democratic forms of urban planning. Although not always expressed or elaborated in these terms, it is as well known to them as to the ruling classes and governments that urban space and the way it is produced, appropriated or dominated are determinants for the configuration of power relations – and, therefore, it is an object of dispute.

Other groups, in their turn, present us with different types of insurgent spatial practices that, as Harvey (2008) affirms, seek to remodel the city in a different way to that advocated by the interests of the state and the ruling classes. Significant examples are urban squats – the term commonly used in English to refer to unauthorised occupations of unused public or private property, including buildings and land for self-construction, housing and other political and cultural uses.

It is important to note, however, that hegemonic powers constantly seek to neutralize or destroy such initiatives, supported by historically naturalised narratives of fear and crime, stemming mainly from the mainstream media and certain governmental groups. These frequently classify squatters as dangerous trespassers and their practices as unjustifiable crimes. Squatters' practices, in turn, consistently challenge such oppressive ideas by giving new meanings to the production and appropriation of space, constituting a form of counter-hegemonic architecture.

They represent localised but integrated focuses of resistance that insist, sometimes by necessity, others by conviction and very often by both, on fighting head-on against naturalised power structures and on demonstrating that other forms of social relations are possible, in a clear prefigurative perspective. Importantly, squatters' practices are inherently collective, rendering the notion of self-management of a quotidian character. These are also significant features of squatting in the RMBH. Not only does it respond to the general assertion that counter-hegemonic forms of resistance imply a collective effort to "think, imagine and dream beyond hegemony" (Gibbons, 2019, p. 74), but adds to it through direct, autonomous and collective action.

From a methodological point of view, this paper presents a critical analysis and further developments from part of the data obtained in Campos (2020)¹, when the author conducted a comparative study on squatting in three urban areas in Brazil, Spain and the Basque Country. In addition to an extensive documental and bibliographic review, the methodological strategy included participant observation and semi-structured interviews with activists, researchers, and/or residents of urban squats. The analysis of self-produced documents in the visited venues, and previous academic research also integrate the research method.

Nine field visits and fifteen interviews were conducted in the RMBH in 2019. Since then, the author has actively participated in a workgroup at Kasa Invisível, a squat for housing and other cultural and political purposes in the central area of Belo Horizonte (the main city in RMBH), which also contributed to this discussion. Table 1 indicates dates, localities, names of squats where conversations took place (or a “_” when the interview occurred in other locations), and a code for each interviewee. In one case, the interviewee asked to be identified by an alias. Figure 1 presents the visited squats on a map of Belo Horizonte.

¹ This research was partially funded by a scholarship granted by the Capes Foundation, Brazil, process number 88881.189843/2018-01.

Código do Entrevistado	Data	Localidade	Ocupação
BH1	03 jul. 2019	Belo Horizonte	Ocupação Carolina Maria de Jesus
BH2	03 jul. 2019	Belo Horizonte	Ocupação Dandara
BH3, BH4	05 jul. 2019	Belo Horizonte	Ocupação Pátria Livre
BH5	05 jul. 2019	Belo Horizonte	—
BH6	11 jul. 2019	Belo Horizonte	Ocupação Paulo Freire
BH7	01 ago. 2019	Belo Horizonte	—
BH8	06 ago. 2019	Belo Horizonte	—
BH9	15 ago. 2019	Belo Horizonte	Casa de Referência da Mulher Tina Martins
BH10	20 ago. 2019	Santa Luzia	Ocupação Vitória
BH11	28 ago. 2019	Belo Horizonte	Ocupação Dandara
Zenite, BH12, BH13	03 set. 2019	Belo Horizonte	Kasa Invisível
BH14	13 set. 2019	Belo Horizonte	—

Table. 1: Interviews RMBH, 2019. Source: Campos, 2020, p. 44.

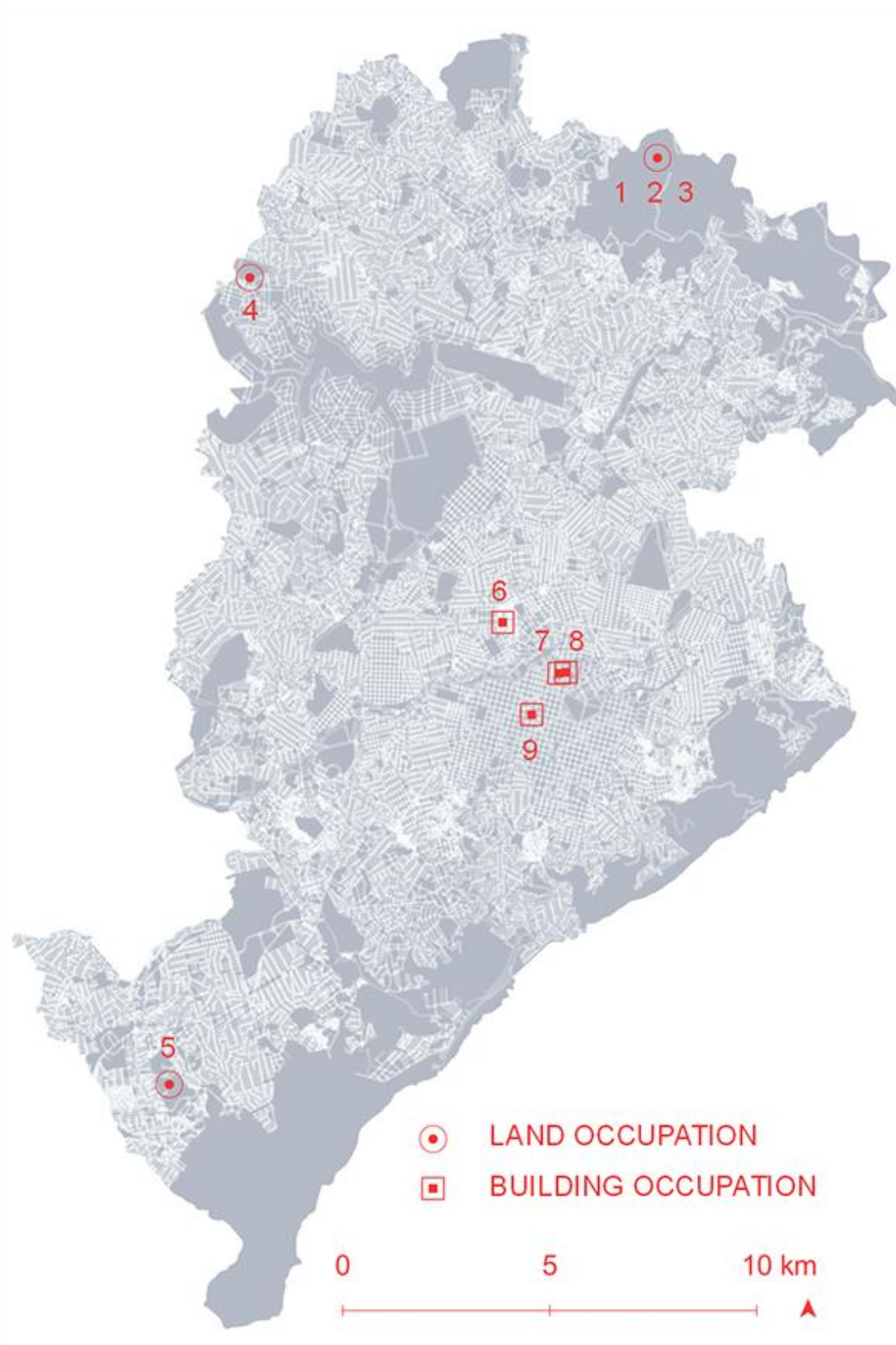


Fig. 1: Field Visits in Belo Horizonte, May/Sep. 2019. Source: Campos, 2020, p. 170.

Complementarily, the author currently coordinates an interdisciplinary and interinstitutional collaborative mapping initiative in the RMBH, with the participation of activists and other members of the squatting movement in this Metropolitan Region, which also contributed to some of the ideas expressed in this paper.

2 Spatial Control as a Power Strategy

The notion of discipline was proposed by Foucault (1995) as something that binds the exercise of power over the body (of an individual or a population) to the distribution of objects in space and the objectification of the masses. And just as this relation can be observed in a prison, a monastery, or a workshop, it could also be verified in a city. It proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space, where each individual has their own place, avoiding distributions in groups, breaking dangerous communications, supervising and individualising bodies without, however, giving them a fixed position, but distributing them and circulating them in a network of relations (Foucault, 1995).

The idea of a spatial organisation that aims to control where one can live or circulate, most often not through direct orders but by the insertion into a naturalised dynamics of bodies in space, as if a punitive logic has in fact been applied to the whole of society, is by no means foreign to how contemporary cities are planned. As Souza (2010) suggests, such coercive spatial practices have been concretely of various types, including dispersion, segregation, confinement, access interdiction, monopoly or oligopoly of spatial resources, in addition to more subjective strategies, as the induction of behaviours through signs inscribed in space. Not only are these strategies of power and political control, but many of them are essential mechanisms for profit-oriented processes that completely disregard the needs of populations considered to be standing in their way.

Lefebvre (1991, p. 358) considers that "thanks to the operation of power practical space is the bearer of norms and constraints. It does not merely express power – it proceeds to repress in the name of power [...]. As a body of constraints, stipulations and rules to be followed, social space acquires a normative and repressive efficacy." If space is made useful by the governing entities, be them representative of the state, or private interests, say the real estate market, and contributes to an individual and collective coercion of bodies, a possible question to be made is: *Does the taking of power over space to transform it and use it more autonomously constitutes an effective counter-hegemonic strategy?* This is a relevant point of investigation, especially considering that historically, urban space has been proper to differentiate and hierarchise, compare and normalise, homogenise and exclude. The different, that is, the unable to meet the standards and norms imposed by the capital and by private property, are in most cases excluded and forced to the margins. Only those who can conduct themselves accordingly – the rich, the owners, and sometimes the docile and productive workers – are welcomed to the centre.

It is also possible to affirm, however, as suggested by Souza (2010), that spatial practices have historically served either domination, coercion, imposition from the top down or from the outside into the laws and norms that regulate the life of a group or society (in a word, to heteronomy); or emancipation, self-determination, legitimate self-defence, self-government, the free and lucid institution of laws and norms by the body of citizens, directly (in a word, to autonomy). At the same time, even though space in itself may be primordially given, its organisation and meaning are products of social transformation and experience, and therefore we should refer to space as a social construction (Soja, 1989). Despite how clear the intentions of the planner may be – say, to design spaces as tools of control; or, well-intentionally, as tools of emancipation – it is no less accurate to say that the (ever-changing) meanings and uses of urban space establish themselves only in a posterior moment when its materiality is socially appropriated.

As Lefebvre (2016) suggests, neither the architect, the urbanist, the sociologist, the economist, the philosopher, or the politician can take from nothing, by decree, new forms and relations. They do not have the powers of a thaumaturge, he says, nor create social relations: Only social life in its global capacity has such powers. More generally, it is each society, or as specified by Lefebvre (1991), each mode of production and its specific relations of production that produce their own peculiar spaces. In the case of capitalism, Lefebvre (1991) calls the instrumental space thus produced *abstract space* – which has as tools for its implementation traditional urban planning and certain forms of institutionalised participation.

2.1 From criticisms of institutionalised participation to self-management and autonomy

If on the one side several progressive sectors of society have historically struggled for a more democratic and inclusive production of contemporary cities, on the other, institutionalised participatory processes regulated by the state can present risks to urban social movements, especially related to their capacity and conditions of autonomy. When people are not given the conditions to take part in decision-making processes other than to choose between a few previously formatted, ready-

given, limited options; or to actively participate in defining the methods and rules of those processes – which is more often than not the case – autonomy is, as a direct consequence, left out. Institutionalised participatory processes have also been criticised concerning the possibility of cooptation, manipulation by politicians, and state influence on civil society organisations and their militants (Souza, 2006).

In a correlated manner, such processes may also be strongly subordinated to the interests of politically and economically privileged groups that maintain specialists and technicians with the power to define the processes that, although forging an appearance of equal power of decision, do not broaden or even consider the field of action of the people (Milagres, 2016). In the specific case of urban planning, this technocratic conception of participation has been particularly influential, and technical professionals are usually considered the only agents with appropriate scientific knowledge for planning (M. Martínez López, 2011).

If social movements are to be critical towards traditional urbanism and institutionalised participatory processes, then instruments designed and appropriated by neoliberal governments should always be looked at in the context of stabilising mechanisms that may contribute to keeping the order of things as they are. Therefore, in Lefebvre's (2016) radical differentiation between an *ideology of participation* (a more or less developed simulacrum of social activity that allows the acquiescence of the people concerned and at issue to be obtained at the lowest price) and *real and active participation* that he finds in self-management, we will concentrate on the latter. As a significant example, the following section presents a critical assessment of squatting as a counter-hegemonic struggle in the specific context of the RMBH.

3 Urban Squatting as a Counter-Hegemonic Struggle

To date, there have been rich conceptualisations, theorisations, and empirical studies on squatting, with several contributions from different authors worldwide (as examples, Bastos et al., 2017; Campos, 2020; Campos; Martínez, 2020; Canettieri et al., 2020; Cattaneo et al., 2014; Franzoni, 2018; Martínez, 2018, 2020; Moore; Smart, 2015; Nascimento; Libânio, 2016; Squatting Europe Kollektive, 2013; Squatting Everywhere Kollektive, 2018; Tonucci Filho, 2017; Vasudevan, 2015, 2017, among others, include reflections from both the Global South and North). In part, what draws attention to such movements is the fact that they create and adapt in multiple ways alternative economic activities and modes of production, social interaction, and organisational processes that diverge from contemporary neoliberal models. In doing so, as Vasudevan (2015) suggests, they prefigure a different social order while seeking to build conditions for social justice and autonomous forms of collective life.

Squatters' capacity to create *prefigurative policies* (as they formulate and engage with a set of principles and forms of action geared at objective possibilities to change life) significantly substantiates our argument that urban squatting can be seen as a particular type of counter-hegemonic struggle. Furthermore, at the same time as it is deeply related to housing injustice (homelessness, precarious housing conditions, high costs of dignified housing, etc.), it encompasses a much broader range of political, economic and social issues, engaging in broader disputes against neoliberal policies and their effects.

Moreover, the activities squatters promote are largely based on self-management processes that fundamentally differ from institutionalised participatory processes: In self-management, rules are defined by the participating group itself instead of being imposed on them. Finally, all this occurs in an indissoluble and mutually compelling way to the appropriation, adaptation, and production of their own specific spaces. In tune with Lefebvre's (1991) view, in the context of squatting, changes in life occur by means of a correspondent spatial practice, which implies the production of new spatial forms and relations. Squatted lands and buildings correspond and are made as adequate as possible for their collective use. In this process, at least as far as the plan of intentions is concerned, use-value outweighs exchange value, reflecting the possibility that these spaces may fundamentally differ from the oppressive spaces of control naturalised by neoliberal models of society.

3.1 The case of the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte, Brazil

In the RMBH alone, the third-largest urban agglomeration in Brazil, over 20 thousand houses were built in land occupations in the last decade.² Interviews and field visits (as mentioned in the introductory section) allowed to better understand how the quotidian of squats is profoundly shaped by practices that not only seek to respond to urgent needs but also to a critical opposition to oppressive neoliberal urban policies conforming an important form of counter-hegemonic struggle.

As proposed by Ince (2010), prefigurative politics include organisational strategies and decision-making practices. They imply the creation of participatory spaces of/for autonomous social practices and solidarity, rooted in the everyday and engaged in struggles for improvements in the present, in a constant effort to remain self-critical and self-organised, while seeking to prefigure future emancipatory worlds (Ince, 2010). As mentioned by an interviewee (Zenite):

I think the most important is to show people that it is possible for you to organise with a few people. For example [in *Kasa Invisível*], ten people managed to squat and keep a house in downtown BH [Belo Horizonte], technically the wealthiest area in the city, and make it a lively, self-managed space that is not geared towards profit-making activities [...]. It is open to anyone, whether they have money or not. And from an educational perspective, to show people that it is possible to make a building something communal, to make a space something communal and everything that circulates in it to be communal. [...] To show other people that it is possible. If in a city with three million people, we can inspire 100 more people to make spaces like this, we will have more and more and more, right? (Campos, 2020, p. 105, our translation).³

However, it is important to observe that people who decide to live in occupations for housing in the RMBH usually do so in a context of urgent necessity. While some may come from overcrowded situations, others could no longer pay rent or simply lived on the streets. Having a place to live without needing to pay rent means more financial autonomy, which to some people is as simple as being able to pay for food.

Moreover, as reported by several interviewees, especially in the case of squatters in land occupations for self-construction, the perspective of a roof over their heads is only a first step. Once the territory is occupied and people start to settle, their struggles continue, sometimes over many years. Squatted lands usually have no sewerage system, water network, electrical network, street pavement, etc. As they are considered illegal, local governments hardly provide them with the necessary infrastructure. Therefore, squatters build much of it themselves, as much as they can. This means sometimes opening streets without appropriate machinery, temporary electrical and water networks and, of course, their own homes. Difficulties in accessing several public services (such as public schools and healthcare) have also been reported.

These and other issues are addressed by squatters through collective and autonomous practices mostly based on self-management processes. Self-management is not an easy term to define in a few words. First of all, it is not configured by a fixed set of previously defined rules – quite the contrary. Self-management inevitably entails the possibility of changing the rules, including new parameters, or excluding criteria that no longer fit the group's objectives or organisational procedures. Different squats tend to have different self-management models, better adapted to their own goals and internal dynamics. Specifically, striking differences in the scales of occupations – which ranged from a few dozen (or hundreds) squatters to thousands of people – are also reflected in the models of self-management adopted.

Another critical differentiation, in building occupations that do not have housing as a (main) purpose, for the most part, the squatters themselves defined internal rules and participated in decision-making processes, etc. In many cases, they also belonged to other collectives and/or broader urban social movements. In the case of occupations for housing (in abandoned

² Based on the lectures of Frei Gilvander, Izabella Gonçalves and Leonardo Péricles at the seminar *Dez anos de ocupações urbanas na RMBH: História, lutas e novos caminhos*, June 26-28, 2019. Organised by the *Cosmópolis* research group/UFMG.

³ É, eu acho que o mais importante é mostrar pras pessoas que é possível você se organizar com poucas pessoas. Por exemplo [na *Kasa Invisível*], dez pessoas conseguiram ocupar e manter uma casa no centro de BH, tecnicamente na área mais nobre da cidade e tornar ela um espaço vivo, autogerido, que não é voltado para atividades que visam lucro [...]. Ela é aberta pra qualquer pessoa, independente de ter dinheiro ou não. E numa perspectiva educativa, de mostrar às pessoas que é possível fazer de um imóvel algo comum, fazer de um espaço algo comum e de tudo que circula nele ser comum. [...] Mostrar pra outras pessoas que é possível. Se em uma cidade de 3 milhões de pessoas, a gente conseguir inspirar mais 100 pessoas a fazer espaços como esse, a gente vai ter mais e mais e mais né?

lands or buildings), in their turn, it was usual that external actors supported and participated in organisational processes. These included different social movements, collectives, representatives of institutions –universities, left-wing political parties, progressive sectors of the catholic church – and many others.

It is possible, however, to make several general assertions. A first important characteristic among squats in the RMBH is that *self-management usually encompasses decision-making processes that include the conduction of general assemblies and other meetings*. Importantly, as some of the interviewees reported, such procedures constitute opportunities for knowledge exchange and politicisation. Secondly, self-management practices imply a *particular concern with horizontality* – that is, a general expectation that all participants have equal chances to have their points of view considered by the rest of the group and equal conditions of opinion and participation, without power imbalances. However, while horizontality may be seen as desirable, hierarchical relationships are quite common – whether tacitly existent or assumedly adopted. In this sense, while horizontality was referred to as an aspiration by several of the interviewees, it was also mentioned that some of the participants might enjoy greater influence. As an example, especially in the case of housing occupations organised by social movements, there is a significant presence and important participation of squatters considered as leadership figures or coordinators.

A third general feature refers to the *decisions and rules defined during assemblies*. Depending on the case, interviewees revealed that these might be mandatory even for those who did not participate in a particular decision; or, in other cases, what has been decided should ideally be followed by all, but the individual autonomy of each person is prioritised. Not following rules considered more relevant, essential, or imperative might also result in the expulsion of individuals from a squat. These included the perpetration of acts of violence against women; robbery; drug trafficking; people who keep empty plots in land occupations without living on them; and physical violence of any type.

As a fourth general aspect, self-management also meant *putting decisions and plans into practice, usually through task division*. These may include internal and/or quotidian tasks, such as cleaning, cooking, gardening, building and maintenance, communicating and managing social media, taking care of children, and others; external and/or eventual activities, including exchanging materials and information, visits to other occupations, meetings with governmental entities, etc.; or even urgent, unexpected, demand-oriented or mutual-support-related ones such as demonstrations and resisting evictions. In general, activities are organised by setting up workgroups of permanent or temporary character depending on the type of demand.

A fifth general feature, *raising funds and other resources for different activities* is necessary to pay for supplies and guarantee the maintenance of squats, support social movements and collectives, pay for electrical and water supply (when necessary), and many others. Finally, *different degrees of engagement or participation of people in self-managed processes* (depending on their different interests, time availability or other factors) are here considered our sixth and final general aspect. In general, though, it is possible to say that self-management is deeply imbricated in the lives of squatters, even compromising, as suggested by M. A. Martínez López (2015, p. 252), "the whole of everyday life for the people most involved in it."

4 Conclusion

Squatters in the RMBH seek to find solutions not only for immediate or urgent needs, especially housing, but also to promote broader changes in life, including social, cultural, and economic aspects, constituting a particular form of counter-hegemonic struggle. Importantly, they do so in an indissoluble and mutually compelling way to the appropriation, adaptation, and production of their own specific spaces. Consequently, the spaces appropriated and reshaped in the context of squatting correspond or reflect as much as possible the changes aimed by squatters, their collective practices, and their ideals for the future, while at the same time opposing the power imbalances against which they struggle.

Squatters engage in their daily practices in a context of constant oppression by hegemonic powers that have historically aimed at neutralizing or destroying their initiatives, supported by naturalised narratives that depict squatters as dangerous criminals. Nonetheless, squatters' practices consistently challenge such oppressive ideas by giving new meanings to the production and appropriation of space, constituting a form of counter-hegemonic architecture.

In fact, the changes in social relations aimed at and prefigured by squatters happen by means of, during the course of, and/or because of the production and use of their own spaces – in a reciprocal relation. The spaces they produce and adapt are

not *destined* to generate maximum profit or be commercialised as commodities but to the primacy of use. In their communal areas, during the open activities they promote, in their daily organisational and collective decision-making processes, squatters demonstrate that a different life, one that is not based on profit rates, private property and repressive social control is a tangible possibility. Squatting goes beyond denying imposed forms of social-economic relations or modes of production. There is, in fact, also a refusal of how space is controlled, distributed, organised, and owned.

Instead of representing a pre-conceived or immutable future or simply imagining new possibilities, this paper suggests that prefigurative practices include squatters' capacity to effectively change the here and now. They show that a different present is already possible and that changes in life can be broader, more inclusive, and more legitimate in the future.

Self-management, in its turn, presents squatters with the possibility of defining rules and making choices that respond to different realities and scales, including a significant plurality of participants. Ideally, self-management also implies horizontality-based processes as a way to promote true and broad participation of the actors involved. On the other hand, hierarchical relationships can exist and, in some cases, even be considered desirable. Nevertheless, as a process that gives space for collective change, for learning from past experiences and improving for future situations, for proposing and experimenting, and for creating spaces that adapt and respond to community demands – for all this, self-management is largely what makes squatting, in itself, a change.

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