HOUSING AND CONSUMPTION: SOCIAL STATUS, DESIRE, AND FULFILLMENT

LIZIANE DE OLIVEIRA JORGE

Liziane De Oliveira Jorge is an Architect-urbanist, PhD in Architecture from the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of Sao Paulo, professor at the University of Vila Velha, and researcher at the ArqCidade Group, which investigates the quality of contemporary residential architecture.

Abstract

The goal of this article is to discuss the meaning of housing in contemporary society. It presents arguments that enhance the primary role of housing as a commodity, subject to a cultural, economic, and marketing logic that deliberately benefits from seductive methods to disseminate new lifestyles. Turned into a cultural symbol of prestige and success, contemporary housing produced by the real estate industry in general, implies a value system that allows individuals to recognize and participate in their desired social group. Finally, this article addresses the architect's dichotomy in the professional exercise of housing development, which breaks into technical skills and theoretical knowledge, service provision and artistic idealism.

Keywords: real estate market; lifestyle; social status; contemporary housing; consumption.

Housing and the city

Housing is a fundamental requirement for individuals to consubstantiate their social, physiological, psychological, and moral conditions. Depicted as durable property, housing provides individuals with a sense of protection, stability, and recognition within a social structure. The contemporary city, a place where a heterogeneous mass of users with plural lifestyles gravitate, should encourage, through housing, the display of diversity and indeterminacy, and embrace the uncertainties and distinct needs that accompany individuals throughout their lives, providing them with opportunities for choice. In addition, the act of living, which now demands greater integration of uses, functions, and activities, is not limited to the domestic sphere, but projects into urban space to dialogue with other groups of individuals, participating in the community and taking advantage of a sophisticated network of communication and facilities.

The synergy between housing and the city is nowadays constrained by the idealization of a mythologized lifestyle and the imposition of housing preferences manipulated by a colossal marketing industry, an appropriate instrument of control for the real estate industry, which pushes unlimited needs on customers, which threaten the essence of man, his freedom and reciprocity with other human beings.

Housing and social status

The population of contemporary cities grows continuously, thereby subtracting urban space and multiplying densities in large centers. The ideal solution to the problem of housing this expanding population is to avoid massive consumption of space, which results in the construction of collective dwellings, dense and compact cities (Falagan, Montaner, & Muxi, 2011, p. 37). An unquestionable paragon of urban life, the tenement is the typological model that, lacking an exclusive client, adopts a standard agenda, based on biological, functional, and normative criteria. By disregarding its residents' differing needs, manipulating the collective imaginary, and consolidating space in standard shapes, the tenement contributes to distance users away from a fuller experience of domestic

space, a place for desires and affections, multiplicity, intimacy, disarray, and the natural indeterminacy of being.

Collective housing typologies, according to Kopp (1990), based on scientific, hygienist, and economic principles has enabled the proliferation of monotonous, repetitive, and identical buildings. Features such as functionality, ergonomics, mechanization, and programmatic and aesthetic simplification, legitimized through rationalization and standardization, have been internationalized from the first half of the twentieth century and are still being adopted as essential design parameters for today's tenements. After numerous models based on universal conventions, standardized, typified, and prescribed housing solutions still constitute an alibi for the development of multifamily residential buildings, now adorned with collective, allegedly innovative amenities and attributes.

Threatened by large-scale uniformity and clichés of happiness manipulated by consumer industry, housing has been reduced to a commodity, a real estate product, and a symbol of social status and of a unified international culture. Despite the inevitable influence of capitalist market logic, an economic domination model, people crave, through housing, for an advantage that will provide their everyday life with sense and meaning to or even a distinct personality condition among ordinary citizens.

Contributions of distinct authors such as Henri Lefebvre, Zygmunt Bauman, Pierre Bourdieu, and Bernard Tschumi, is opportune in that they enable, from a modern and postmodern perspective, the employment of concepts such as individualism, freedom, stability, and culture in everyday life because, once turned into powerful ideological tools, they camouflage their biased intentions to benefit owners of the means of production.

Real estate marketing — one of the most cunning tools of coercion and a powerful exchange gimmick — has a remarkable impact on contemporary society, which, seduced by a prosperous, sophisticated, obsolescent, ephemeral, and technological lifestyle, sees the real estate product as the ideal way of fulfilling their desires. As objects of consumption, residential buildings and their attributes dominate the sphere of desires, dictating fashions, tastes, and trends, monopolizing social imagination and the option for a property that follows the latest market requirements. This relationship

reflects a consumer society that craves for pleasure, prestige, and social status. According to Lefebvre (1991, p. 89), *"satisfaction is the aim and the objective of this society and its official justification"* and this fulfillment can only be achieved by acknowledging a status of superiority over the other, supported by disseminated social codes that take qualities from a practical level to that of imagination.

Collective appropriation of objects into social life ensures consumer society's fulfillment. Along these lines,

> […] certain objects refuse to be restricted to the level of experience or of make-believe and become emotionally or imaginatively charged because they are both perceived (socially) and expressed, while others attain a 'superior' status and become ideologically overcharged; thus the 'detached' house is experienced by the inhabitant as something to which he has a chance of adapting, but also as dream and ideology.
>
> […] Make-believe as such is part of everyday life, everybody expects is daily (or weekly) ration; yet make-believe has a specific role in relation to everyday experience (compulsions and appropriation): it must disguise the predominance of compulsion and our limited capacity of appropriation, the bitterness of conflicts and the weight of 'real' problems. Publicity does not merely provide an ideology of consumption, a representation of the consumer 'I,' a satisfied consumer, who is fulfilled through a single act, and who coincides with the consumer's actual (ideal) image (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 100).

Clichés of happiness alluded to in consumer culture seduce citizens, eager to play their part in the *model city* idealized by marketeers, where prestigious concepts, e.g., sustainability, ecology, safety, strategies for multiplication of enclosed spaces far from the so-called urban promiscuity, are explored. Unconsciously, urban diversity and multifunctionality, effective criteria for quality of life and socialization of citizens, are easily replaced with segregated residential enclaves such as exclusive gated communities that bring similar users together at no risk of urban contamination. This search for a new urban order, inscribed in a perfect, idealized, besieged world without dissimilar and unexpected neighbors or intruders, points, according to Bauman (1998, p. 22), to a radical purification of classes, united to fight disorder, dirt, and diversification of their surrounding world. Gradually, individuals that remain outside this system feel displaced, disillusioned, and unable to compete with these users and achieve their prestige. Life, rendered meaningless due to this unreachable condition of

momentary fulfillment, is trivialized by an exclusionary social strategy, which reduces physical space to a mere object of satisfaction.

Imbued with "social desirability," with a preconceived image of fulfillment, future residents, when buying a house, seek to achieve happiness through an advantage that will allow them to move into the "territory of the distinguished," disregarding that ordinary everyday needs presuppose, consecutively, meeting people's basic needs as well as providing them with a domestic space that will promote familial and social relationships with safety, comfort, and well-being. This means that functional specialization, standardization, and determinism, strategies still perpetuated by real estate production of housing complexes, homogenize behavior and discourage diversity in the use of housing, indispensable to contemporary citizens, to plural lifestyles of new family structures.

From this observation, it can be said that the middle classes constitute the social category most exposed to advertising seduction, which takes the importance of core values, e.g., personal identity, privacy, and emotional security, to housing, to a lower level, surmounted by immediate promises of a domestic bliss, programmed and engineered from individuals' ephemeral needs and conceited vanities. The middle classes, according to Lefebvre (1991), due to their lack of style, aspire to become Olympian personalities, with no everyday lives or fixed abodes, and are inspired by an adventuresome desire, an exciting, uncompromised, and uninhibited lifestyle.

> The Olympic reconstruct in opulence, by means of power, "free" vagabondage, nomadism; they live on yachts, moving from palace to palace or from a castle to another. They are above "locals." like fairy-tale heroes they provide common mortals with a tangible image - sold at a high price - of make-believe; that which was possible and all that was possible have taken shape. It is another, poorly known, albeit recognizable, everydayness: swimming-pools, white lacquered telephones, antique furniture. Yet there remains the insuperable superiority: the Olympic do not live in the quotidian, whereas the common mortal, his feet glued to the ground, is overwhelmed by it, submerged and engulfed. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 103).

Trademarks of mass production and features legitimized through rationalization and standardization and principles diffused from the first half of the twentieth century, standardization, functionality, and repetition are adopted, even today, as alibis to justify obtuse housing policies, in the

sense of imposing severe limitations on the use of domestic space by typified users, anonymous clients of tenement buildings. This condition of users' subordination to utility and its consequent prescription of behaviors and habits — along with the impoverishment of urban life — are in turn masked by trickeries of the real estate market, which sells houses as products to be consumed, not inhabited in their fullness.

For Bourdieu (2001, p. 83), market competition is an ingredient of submission and social leveling, since "*competition, far from diversifying, homogenizes.*" The myth of product differentiation is a counterpoint to supply uniformity, so the possibilities of choice to which the middle class surrenders are tightly controlled, camouflaged by the imaginary and cultural dimension, the consumption of symbolic goods, social status, and other values that reduce individuals to a vulgar and uniform category.

The lifestyle desired by contemporary societies permeates all social categories. Elites, who enjoy more intensely the advances of the information age, are extremely influenced by the global culture phenomenon, which is soundly established in all spheres of everyday life. Technological innovations, the cult of the body, fashion, art, and consumption are dictated by a linearity fostered by advertising and the media, colossal means of disseminating an economic ideology of domination. The consequences of this horizontality threaten historical and cultural specificities of each place, since they materialize spatial forms and ambiances that become symbols of this global identity wherever manifested.

In order to impose an ideology of domination, "*consumer culture uses images, signs and symbolic goods which summon up dreams, desires and fantasies which suggest romantic authenticity and emotional fulfillment in narcissistically pleasing oneself*" (Featherstone, 1995, p. 48). Individuals, stimulated by visual appeal, identify with ad messages, whose objects, besides representing the commodities themselves, stand for the symbols admired by postmodern middle classes, in search of a '*dream world*' full of "*people fascinated by identity, presentation, appearance, lifestyle, and the endless quest for new experiences*" (Featherstone, 1995, p. 71). Aware of the need for aesthetic modeling of everyday life, cultural intermediaries

propose a constant renewal of signs to which merchandises are subject so that ready-to-use products can be uninterruptedly reproduced, consumed, and discarded.

For Featherstone (1995, p. 33), advertising is especially capable of exploring possibilities of cultural illusions and associations, providing images of romance, exoticism, desire, beauty, achievement, communality, scientific progress, and the good life to mundane consumer goods such as soaps, washing machines, automobiles, and alcoholic drinks. This infallible formula, which turns residents into mere consumers, degrades housing to an obsolescent and outdated position, incapable of meeting the needs of a generation of families. The disregard for subjective criteria, e.g., affection towards the property, construction of a life story, identity with district of origin, and familiarity with neighborhood, is one of the conditions that have been imposed by the real estate market, not to mention the dimensional inconvenience of new apartments, based on the alleged effectiveness of combined ambiances and the advantages of lavish balconies, designed to be integrated to the living room or other adjoining rooms. Square meters are subtracted; amenities much desired by new residents are added.

The housing scene has assimilated the contemporary capitalist market logic so completely that it now produces images and places of consumption, promises happiness and fulfillment, and raises ordinary citizens to the category of distinguished personalities. Time and again, ads extoll the joy and charms of the nuclear family, a traditional model that has been gradually supplanted by plural familial contexts, new domestic structures, and less paternalistic and ritualistic lifestyles.

Figure 1. The persistence of the nuclear family as a stereotype of contentment in advertising folders of housing projects. Source: Advertising folder for the housing project Vivienda Laranjeiras Condomínio Clube, Serra, ES.

Architecture ads are defined by Bernard Tschumi as part of the architectural imaginary, translated onto paper to 'represent' virtual space. Architecture, this 'masked figure' that lurks behind drawings, words, judgments, habits, and technical constraints must be constantly unveiled. "*The typical function of incessantly reproduced ads, unlike the singular architectural object, is to foster the desire for something that is beyond the page proper*" (Tschumi, 2008, p. 582). By means of attractive collages and angles, the compulsory scale models and illustrations of housing projects, go beyond the architectural dimension in order to clarify the technical and functional aspects of space, to show off intangible and ideological attributes: security, tranquility, and natural geographic attributes (living near the beach or park), exclusiveness (gated communities), and to boast their bucolic denominations and distinguished exponents (artist names, cities, renowned personalities) and stylistic features.

Figure 2. Promise of peace and quiet in housing project at the side of a busy metropolitan speedway. The image conveys harmony with nature and repudiates its surroundings and the city. Source: Advertising folder for the housing project Itaúna Aldeia Parque, Serra, ES.

Advertisements of real estate projects explore words that promote symbolic associations, easily assimilated, representing prestige and social status: *convenience*, *sophistication*, *luxury*, *elegance*, *comfort*, *refinement*, *nobility*, *modernity*, *technology*, *exclusivity*, *innovation*, *harmony*, among others. According to Bourdieu (2001, p. 86), "*advertising and the media exert extraordinary influence on the whole of contemporary societies*," dictating fashions and cultural patterns that follow the logic of profit.

The valuation of attributes of buildings over their floor plans is a risky factor for the client. Fascinated by the prospect of living in an apartment with "countless leisure options," users underestimate the importance of private space, which provides true home and coziness standards and conditions for performing everyday tasks essential to a family. In a community that is being individualized on a daily basis, assimilation of sociability-related concepts seems paradoxical, such as to be compelled to share the much

coveted gourmet space with hundreds of other residents of neighboring apartments. Thus, contemporary residential architecture, as a product for the masses, provides veiled alternatives, according to parameters established by the market itself, which restrict lifestyle choices and freedoms to those established by the economic elite.

Architects and their professional challenges in the design of contemporary housing

According to Philip Bess (2008, p. 409), today's prevailing architecture is built by real estate developer, and architecture itself has begun to be seen and praised by proprietors as a commodity and a marketing resource. People — considered by the author as drenched in "*Nietzschean individualism*," in the inescapable sense of disagreeing with a previous social contract and projecting their individual tastes and divergences — are solely concerned with their interests and their private lives and the accomplishment of their own household tasks, refusing to fully participate in community life, except when it is convenient to do so.

"*In essence, the city is an economic undertaking that provides individuals with the material goods and anonymity needed to achieve their personal goals*" (Philip Bess, 2008, p. 407). This is the context that has replaced the plurality and singularity of urban landscape. It has multiplied spaces that eliminate diversity, encourage consumerism and feign a participatory civic life, by simply catalyzing people seduced by shopping and entertainment spaces like malls, consumption temples, thematic museums, and gated condominiums. This amalgam of mythologized spaces represents, essentially, the manipulation of symbols in favor of a universal urban vocabulary, recreating the same cityscape regardless of context and place.

At the heart of their profession, architects are indoctrinated to value artistic, cultural, and social dimensions. Autonomous in their creative expression, architects seek collective recognition through the materialized object resulting from their differing mental conceptions representative of their own era. As stated by Durand (1974, p. 10), the liberal nature of the architectural profession implies an intrinsic relationship between trust and

responsibility, except that practiced in the hunt for clients or in ads of a commercial sort. In current times, most architects would be condemned for violating professional ethics, wrestling for market share, and accepting deterioration of the profession, and would take the blame for the perpetuation of specimens geared primarily to economic and media consumption.

Ghirardo (2008, p. 417) criticized the role of architecture in society in his manuscript "The architecture of fraud," which, among other things, considers that today's architectural practice implies a schism between a profession seen as art or as service. As a rule, the former encompasses the territory of utopias and fiction, opposing economic interests. The reasons for that categorization, as the author observes, are defined according to formal attributes of architectural work — from opaque criteria and subjective, objectable, and arbitrary criticism — or even by means of evasive discourses that raise architecture to a sentimental consistency. The latter view is supported by a branch of architects who collaborate with the construction industry and real estate enterprises, thus acknowledging architecture as a trade or as a business.

When developing projects for the housing market, architects usually transcend the idealism that permeates their profession. Subject to a relationship of complete subordination to developers and builders, architects are stripped of their decision power, constantly reduced to an instrument to facilitate the approval of projects by government authorities. In certain cases, architects do not develop even the building façade or the internal layout that accompanies its launching, and, consequently, have to share with other professionals eventual creative triumphs. Cordeiro Filho's (2008) and Mahfouz's (2008) opinions on this issue are worthy of note. The former states that a tenement project is closely related to the presentation of its façade, which will determine whether the buyer will want to know more about the deal or not:

> It's mandatory to employ an architect specializing in façades. There's no need to hire drawing board notables, successors of Niemeyer, Ruy Ohtake, Paulo Mendes da Rocha or other big shots. The chosen architect must have experience in real estate development. That's what it takes (Cordeiro Filho, 2008, p. 63).

Mahfouz (2003), in turn, highlights the repositioning of architects' professional practice and the subordination of their creative potential, stating that architecture has changed from a cultural activity to a service:

> The visual appearance of most buildings is no longer the result of a design process based on its own rules, but it is decided by outsiders solely concerned about potential sales. That is, architects have begun to do what they are told by communication and marketing professionals (Mahfuz, 2003, p. 174).

For builders and developers, an architect's signature design contributes to marketing the project by attracting more customers, who are offered a further "Casa Cor"-style advantage, with signatures of renowned professionals and exclusive solutions. Stripped of their scholarly abilities, many architects turn into interior designers, a featureless profession in the eyes of customers.

The legacy of a pedagogical tradition based on exceptionality still dominates the agenda of architectural history at universities, in addition to its explicit link to Western production, which possesses the set of material and cultural conditions that is reflected in a globalized way. The most significant, admired, and memorable architectural works are, in the contemporary context, those produced through the magnetism of celebrated architects or paradigmatic buildings that house multicultural or specialized events, such as institutions, financial, and commercial centers. Alongside this age-old tradition and symbolism, scholarly architecture is now equated to recurring clichés of global architecture. Its regular, more predominant production is seldom depicted, often criticized, and usually accused of causing the biggest atrocities to cityscapes. Schooled in the exceptionality of the idiosyncratic architectural repertoire, architects need audacity to design something ordinary, since surrendering to the market implies abidance by the rules of the system and giving up the possibility of designing prosaic buildings.

For Mahfuz (2001), the dominant pattern of contemporary Brazilian architecture corresponds to the production of low quality buildings, whose reasons are quite complex. The author acknowledges the loss of the cultural dimension that permeates architecture, associated with "*the growing prevalence of commercial construction, dominated by market rationale and widespread obsession with creating images*" (MAHFUZ, 2001, p. 1). Therefore, the logic of the market has imparted an obsolescent character to

architecture, following fads or trends, reducing buildings to objects of consumption.

The awareness of the difficulty in defining the very essence of architectural work disaggregates 'customer/server' and 'author/ architect' into distinct categories in a distant dimension. The true understanding of architecture is restricted to its field of knowledge and scholarly citizens, vanishing species. Malard's (2006) warning sheds light on the value system to which the architectural profession is subject and on its judgment on the part of ordinary people, which, according to the author, are only able to recognize the difference between 'old' and 'modern' buildings. Indeed, they would be in trouble if they were to classify modern buildings as brutalist, constructivist, and high-tech or old buildings as Renaissance, baroque, and neoclassical. The aesthetic character of architecture, expressed primarily through its outward appearance, shape, plastics, "*visual aspects that mark the presence of the architectural object in the world and make it known, appreciated, discussed, and controversial*" (Malard, 2006, p. 55), is going through a shift in its artistic dimensions, i.e., contemporary manifestations that conceive architecture as a product of a mode of production.

The refusal to accept responsibility for concrete problems of architecture and the world it belongs in is Ghirardo's object of analysis. The author attributes detached reflection before construction policies and existing power structures to this very professional category. According to formalist criticism, architects choose the safest path because of their ability to cover up serious architectural problems. "In any of their manifestations, architects dare question construction policies: who builds, where, to whom, and at what price" (Ghirardo, 2008, p. 422). Architects need to reassess the role of their profession, embrace ordinary architectural production, and seek alternatives to reconcile technical and artistic aspects to market demands.

Final remarks

The cloning of idealized, typified, and unambiguous architectures reflects an expanded crisis of meaning, culture, and social relations. The appropriation of this instability by advertising and the media constitutes an ideology that

promotes a generic, aestheticized identity, misguidedly desired by residents.

Marketing housing as a product is a mistake that should be replaced with a higher purpose: to provide individuals with choice opportunities and support for different activities and unexpected desires.

Users should be willing to go beyond the idea of housing as a backdrop for the representation of everyday life and take responsibility for reconciling individual values with community values, which are essential to the quality of urban life. On the other hand, architects should turn away from the banal requirements of the real estate market since adopting a passive and naïve attitude is to despise their own knowledge, the best tool for promoting a social revolution, of human habits and behaviors.

References

BAUMAN, Zygmunt, 1998. *O mal-estar da pós-modernidade*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar.

BESS, Philip, 2008. *Comunitarismo e Emotivismo: Duas visões antagônicas sobre ética e arquitetura*. In: NESBITT, Kate. *Uma nova agenda para a arquitetura: Antologia teórica (1965-1995).* São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2ª ed. rev.

BOURDIEU, Pierre, 2001. *Contrafogos 2: Por um movimento social europeu*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar.

COELHO NETTO, A. J. T., 1979. *A construção no sentido da arquitetura*. São Paulo: Perspectiva.

CORDEIRO FILHO, Antonio, 2008. *Empreendedorismo no mercado imobiliário habitacional*. São Paulo: Atlas.

DURAND, José Carlos, 1974. *A profissão de arquiteto: estudo sociológico*. Rio de Janeiro: CREA 5a. Região.

FEATHERSTONE, Mike, 1995. *Cultura de consumo e pós-modernismo*. Translation by Julio Assis Simões. São Paulo: Studio Nobel.

GHIRARDO, Diane, 2008. *A arquitetura da fraude*. In: NESBITT, Kate. *Uma nova agenda para a arquitetura: Antologia teórica (1965-1995).* São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2ª ed. rev.

KOPP, Anatole, 1990. *Quando o moderno não era um estilo e sim uma causa*. São Paulo: EDUSP.

LEFEBVRE, Henri, 1991. *A vida cotidiana no mundo moderno*. Translation by Alcides João de Barros. São Paulo: Ática.

MAHFUZ, Edson da Cunha, 2001. *A arquitetura consumida na fogueira das vaidades*. Arquitextos (São Paulo. Online), São Paulo, v. 012.

MAHFUZ, Edson da Cunha, 2003. *ISO 9000: o novo fetiche dos arquitetos*. Arquitextos (São Paulo. Online), v. 000, p. 174. Available at: <http://www.vitruvius.com.br/arquitextos/arq000/esp174.asp> [accessed Julay 2008].

MALARD, Maria Lucia, 2006. *As aparências em arquitetura*. Belo Horizonte: Ed. UFMG.

TSCHUMI, Bernard, 2008. *O prazer da arquitetura*. In: NESBITT, Kate. *Uma nova agenda para a arquitetura: Antologia teórica (1965-1995).* São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2ª ed. rev.

FALAGÁN, David, H.; MONTANER, Josep Maria; MUXÍ, Zaida, 2011. *Herramientas para habitar el presente. La vivienda del siglo XXI. Tools for inhabiting the present. Housing in the 21st century*. Barcelona: Máster Laboratorio de la Vivienda del Siglo XXI.