REDESCRIBING THE PROJECT OF THE GROUND: A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY
REDESCRIÇÃO DO PROJETO DO TÉRREO: ENSAIO FOTOGRÁFICO
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Abstract

This photographic essay and accompanying text continue an effort to document and update the Jardim São Francisco housing complex (Demetre Anastassakis, São Paulo), developed in the late 1980s, with a particular interest in the spatial implications of that collective housing experience. Unlike the spatial products imposed by hegemonic thinking — dictated by the hypercommodification and standardization of the 'urban economy' — this collective experience offers an alternative spatial proposition, capable of questioning the dominant practices and ideologies. It was developed based on the engagement with housing struggle movements and generated friction conditions with those hegemonic spatialities, standing out from violent development processes and seeking alternatives. Interpreted as manifestations of resistance, they help to make legible ways of life that are already among us and have gained relevance in recent investigative exercises. In addition to the documentation effort, the photographic essay presented here, carried out in 2021, gives support to an exercise of redescription, as proposed by AbdouMaliq Simone and Edgar Pieterse (2017), in light of the discussion of *Progetto di suolo*, by Bernardo Secchi (1986). By questioning and opposing the dominant understanding of the space of dwelling, the photographic essay, an exercise of redescription, reveals aspects of urban life's spatiality that seem to have disappeared, local vitalities that were turned invisible by an apparent decline. Thus, this documentation intends to give visibility to a perspective that allows us to disarm our perception, offering a framework for critical reflection. We indicate it as an incubator for counter-hegemonic spatialities, a resource for the discipline of Architecture and Urbanism, and a reference for decision-making and action processes that seek an alternative to spatial homogenization.

Keywords: Collective Housing, Jardim São Francisco, Redescription, Urban Land, Ground Floor

1   Introduction: preamble

1989, Sao Paulo. The Greek-Iguaçuan architect Demetre Anastassakis (1948–2019) coordinates the winning team of the competition for social housing in Jardim São Francisco. Developed for a plot of land in the east zone of the city, sector 8 occupied an area of 103,720 m^2, "typical of the outskirts of large, underdeveloped urban centers [characterized by] sparse occupation, access difficulties, and infrastructure deficiencies" (Marinho, 1990, p. 48, our translation). The proposal follows a constructive criterion that articulates dozens of housing units. It develops reasoning that involves arrangements that provide economy of scale and define a clear intention in the urban design of the ground floor, the ground of the city. Furthermore, this proposal is the result of a collective construction as a record of localized processes and knowledges, fostering coexistence and forms of appropriation of this space by residents. Its unfinished form is determined by the relationship with the housing units themselves, creating an interface and a porous limit that offers an alternative to the urban enclave.
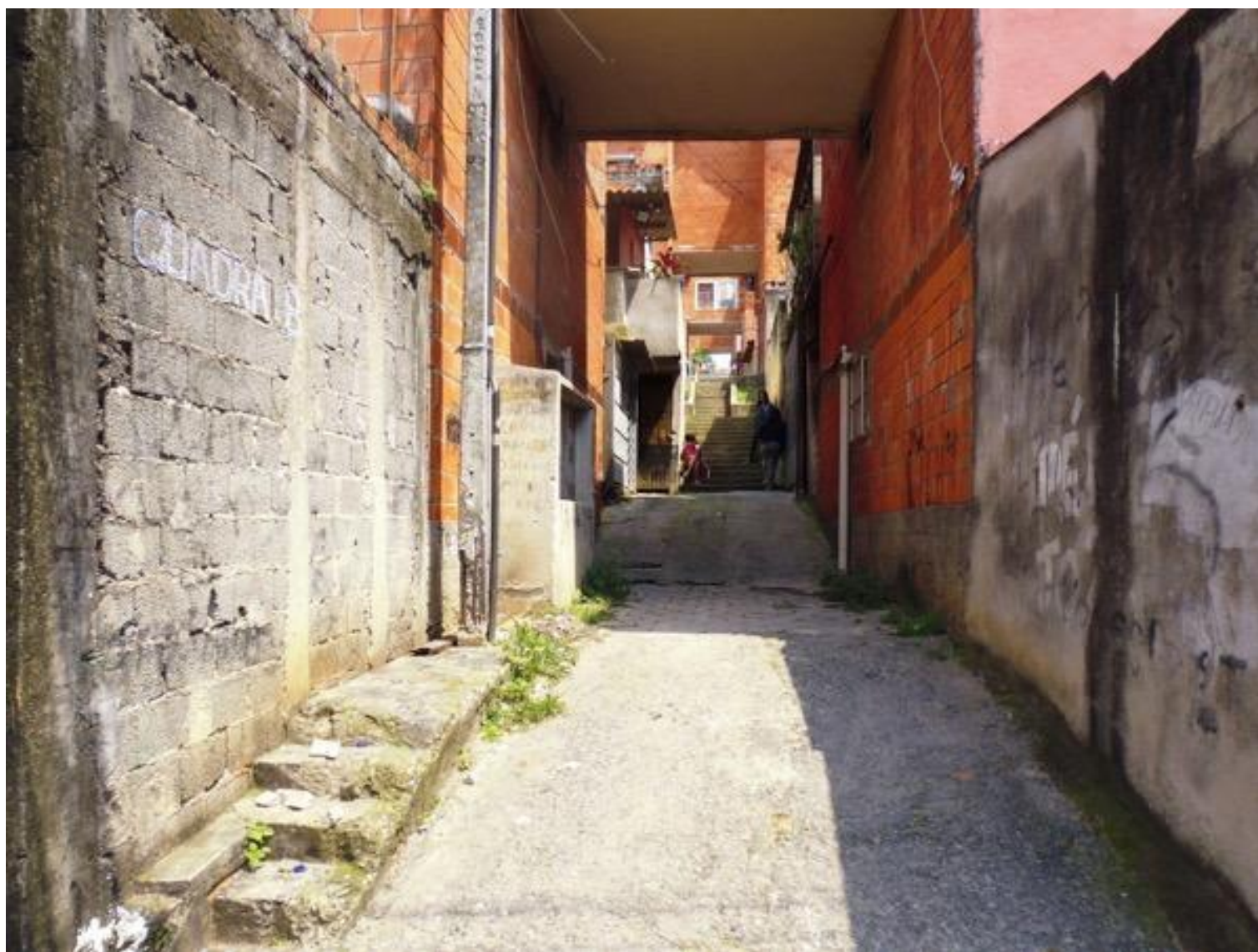
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Fig. 1: Portico. Source: ROSA, 2021.

Fig. 2: Pedestrian path.
Source: ROSA, 2021.

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Fig. 3: Streetscape.
Source: ROSA, 2021.

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Fig. 4: Alley. Source: ROSA, 2021.

The end of the 1980s inaugurated a phase that involved new actors in a series of pioneering experiences in the field of collective housing. The exponential growth of the urban population, the territorial expansion, and the urban sprawl that took place in the second half of the 20th century situate the urgency with which the issue of collective housing was presented in Brazil. In the late 1970s, in the face of growing slums and the housing deficit, organizations and social movements emerged with claims that included housing and less excluding and unequal cities (Bonduki; Rolnik, 1971; Ferro, 1972; Maricato, 1979; Sampaio, 1995). Aligned with this agenda, the academy also participated as one of the actors, in what would become known as the National Movement for Urban Reform (Maricato, 2001). As a product of this context, the housing complex developed with Anastassakis' team would become a paradigmatic experience. It was built based on the *mutirão*[1] and self-management formats, developed under the municipal government of Luiza Erundina, in a context in which the restructuring of the housing policy was a priority and characterized a new posture (Bonduki, 1996, p. 180).

That moment was accompanied by the subsequent development of an instrumental framework in urban planning that aimed to fight social exclusion (Rolnik; Cymbalista, 1997) by enabling governmental mechanisms to operationalize scaled production (Maricato, 2001). This effort was followed by a critical reading of the effective scope and limitations of the application of these urban instruments with the perspective of building democratic and socially just cities (Ferreira, 2003). In

[1] *Mutirão* is a Brazilian word that stands for mutual help. The term relates to the United Nations' promotion of assisted self-help in the 1970s, understood as a way to scale an economic housing promotion and mitigate the increasing global housing crisis. In the 1980s, the workers' party in São Paulo developed a format of assisted self-help that aimed to merge institutionalized and non-institutionalized construction processes, allowing social movements to actively participate in the decision and construction processes of their future dwelling. See Stiphany (2019).

this sense, we focus our observation and documentation on the scale of urban design and everyday life. This provides an opportunity for a discussion about the mutually impacted relationship between urban form and collective experience, which appears to gain legibility in the permeable and collective ground floor of São Francisco.

2   Frictions between hypercommodification, standardization, and prescription

The 2000s were marked by the massive construction of new housing units across the country. The context of a real estate boom and accelerated economic growth allowed the federal government to implement programs of great magnitude. The federal program *Minha Casa Minha Vida* (2009) made possible an unprecedented volume of housing subsidies, for the lowest-income population group. It was accompanied by the Growth Acceleration Program (*Programa de Aceleração Econômica* — PAC, 2007), responsible for providing resources to build infrastructure, with a great impact on the production of urban space. (Rizek et al., 2014; Rolnik et al., 2015) Despite the fact that these policy-market arrangements enabled the large-scale production of affordable housing, "much of contemporary urban development actively undermines the very kinds of experiences, stories, and relationships from within, from which the subsistence of expanding urban populations can be significantly increased."(Simone; Pieterse, 2017, p. 8).

These investments largely disregarded the demand for improvement in existing units and settlements, as well as in ongoing processes that had been organized for decades by movements fighting for housing. As a result, one indicates in the adopted hegemonic ways the very generator of great impact in the city, which is characterized by the low quality of built architecture. As a result, the urbanity standards achieved point to problems such as location, repetition, and low quality (Ferreira, 2013). As early as 1972, Turner and Fichter verified the centralization and control over the format of public housing policy through the model of investment and execution of the plan, in addition to the imposition of a notion of what housing should be. This model did not take into account the understanding of those who would be affected by the proposed housing policy:

> The most common objection to changes in public policy which would increase a user's control of housing at the expense of centralized institutions is that standards would be lowered as a result. The standards the objectors have in mind, however, are not something that can be achieved with available resources, but, rather, represent the objector's own notion of what housing ought to be. (Turner; Fichter, 1972, p.148)

The imposition of a hegemonic spatial model that ignores the characteristic diversity of urban life is a violent gesture. Spatial products and urban policies often result from practices that precisely propose a set of ideological and cultural structures and processes. Being dictated by dominant groups, they disregard non-institutionalized processes and knowledges. This stance is related to the "policies of urban knowledge" (Simone; Pieterse, 2017, p. XIV). They are in line with the idea of hegemony proposed in the field of political theory by the philosopher Antonio Gramsci: they dictate a political direction, protected by a legal framework and legitimized by intellectual authority and moral consensus, oriented to silence the majority (Gruppi, 1978). They point to a trend in the form of governmental action by a political elite and a corporate apparatus associated with it, which exercise control over the forms of production and the use of urban space. This happens through the prescription and emptying of the capacities, ideas, and resources of the majority, with the goal of maneuvering situations where, otherwise, they would not have legitimacy and knowledge.

The spatial products of this hypercommodification and standardization of the urban economy are gated communities, new peripheral neighborhoods, and massive and uniform housing units in the peripheries. These are responsible for parceling (the land), fragmenting, converting space into property, and creating enclosures that are reproduced *ad infinitum*. In contradiction to this movement, we find experiences that present conditions of friction with those spatialities. These friction conditions are manifested in the organization of forms of resistance to the hegemonic reasoning, which is behind the production of space. Transitional movements can transform opportunities for experimentation into resources based on these potential conditions. The project developed with the team coordinated by Demetre Anastassakis for Jardim São Francisco is one of those occasions of experimentation, transformed into a practical and discursive resource in the disciplinary field of Architecture and Urbanism. That proposal offers an alternative spatial proposition that is capable of questioning dominant practices and ideologies. It articulates social, cultural, environmental, and economic arrangements in the built form: an entanglement of articulated spaces that carry intention, different from the spaces deployed by the hegemonic force. The

result of this reasoning seeks to transcend the analysis of binaries to focus on aspects of space in relation to urban life that seem to have disappeared.

Going back in time, updating its documentation, and revisiting that experience allows us to contribute to a theoretical-historical approach and articulate very urgent environmental and social inclusion aspects. This attitude is in line with an agenda that evolves around urban life, in which the city is seen as the perpetual oeuvre of its inhabitants (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 178).

3   (Re) description

We depart from the discussion proposed by AbdouMaliq Simone and Edgar Pieterse (2017) to propose a redescription exercise detached from official forms of description.

3.1   Description

Cities are arenas where existing forms of action are considered, valued, controlled, or legitimized. The official descriptions controlled by the cities define the rules and habits, the possibilities, and the restrictions. There are, however, numerous forms of transgression that coexist with hegemonic practices, despite often not being recognized and legitimized. This duality can be found in cities' imaginative power, which is fostered by experiences and forms of sociability and governance. Robinson (2016) suggests generating knowledge from comparative acts, seeking to reconstitute a range of possibilities for what the urban is and what it can be. From this perspective, the portrayed experience forms part of a larger body of knowledge that is under construction. This process corresponds as much as it diverges from previous references and conventional narratives. It points to forms of urbanization that exist in the present while experimenting with new forms of engagement, design processes, and governance.

3.2   Redescription

As a method, redescription makes it possible to compose what urban knowledge can be as well as what it is. According to Simone and Pieterse (2017), the meaning of redescription is related to Celia Lury's n-dimensional spaces (2012), that is, states of existence that might be. It is not just about projecting possible imaginaries of the future. Rather, it is about redescribing existing conditions that are found in the city as components of a process that may be taking place at a very moment. This is despite being opaque, obstructed, or labeled inoperative, due to the perspective from which it is observed. With that perspective, the opportunity lies in aspiring to do things differently, starting by seeing something different from what we are just seeing. Hence, by unpacking what is undervalued one may reveal the contumacious character of local vitalities. (Simone; Pieterse, 2017, p. 11).

By suggesting a redescription, therefore, this photographic essay intends to reveal spatialities based on a particular way of revisiting its history. Through the photographic record, the gaze into what already exists aims to give legibility to something that seems not to be seen. Consequently, it may configure itself as a resource or reference for decision and action processes. We seek conditions and components that indicate a possible becoming, that is, something that can cause it to exist, evolve, and modify, based on the spatiality of the built environment. It is at these interfaces that we find points of intersection that can serve as places of redescription.

4   Project of the ground: the urban ground

In 1986, Bernardo Secchi published *Progetto di suolo* in Casabella magazine. The article reacts to the profound trend of fragmentation observed in the way of pondering the urban territory. It is based on the design of the ground, the ground floor of the city. Despite the marginality of the theme, Secchi draws attention to its relevance and relates this fragmentation to a division identified in two segregated forms of production of the ground floor in cities. These are the design of architecture as self-contained objects and the merely technical application of a standardized and universal representation of urban functions, as a codified interpretation of space. This discussion has recently regained relevance. Mantziaras and Viganò (2016) point out that the conventional rules of the game are inadequate as they follow the exclusive logic of mass production of housing and urban space as separate units. According to them, this would generate enclosures and promote standardized infrastructure.

Here, we point out topological resonances in experiences that derive from a set of relationships and practices about the inhabited, co-produced, and lived space. These constitute ways of claiming the world against those enclosures that prioritize individuality, disregarding bodies and experiences. We consider how they articulate environmental and social pressures in the construction of the urban ground floor, as we are particularly interested in the spatial implications of these processes. Hence, the focus of interest is experiences that managed to stand out from the violent processes of urban development by providing space for conflicting reflections without flattening divergence and difference. With this reference, we indicate this experience as an incubator of counter-hegemonic spatialities. In response to the demands posed by social movements, the developed architecture departs from places of collective production where innovative models and experiences are generated. Their spatial matrices differ radically from the monotony verified in the depersonalization and lack of authenticity that result from the serialization of large-scale housing complexes.

5   Redescription: the ground floor of the dwelling in Jardim São Francisco

Well-known elements of the city, such as the street, the block, the lot, and the village, organize the spatiality of the neighborhood. These are based on the typology of a traditional Brazilian city. Grouped housing units of different typologies form a perimeter structure around the block, in alignment with the street. From the street, pedestrian paths start at porticos and cut through the blocks, connecting other grouped housing units in the inner part of the urban block. The surface of the ground floor follows the original topography of the site, altering it as little as possible. It denotes a diverse composition of urban situations at the intersections of houses and streets. Porticos serve as entrances to courtyards in the middle of the housing block. That structure provides the housing complex with a sense of unity in its relationship with the city. Those elements seek to integrate it with the city by articulating the domestic with the public space. The resulting collective space increases the permeability between the buildings through both visual and physical access.

The reasoning used in the development takes the popular house as a reference, developed as an embryonic structure. Based on this idea, different typologies of housing units may receive incremental ad hoc expansions, something facilitated by the designed setbacks and slabs. Each resulting arrangement of eight units is accessed by an inner courtyard. A basic constructive criterion is applied to guarantee economies of scale. Modules are combined to generate volumetric variations in implantation and height, considering factors such as density, form, and spatial complexity. The application of a set of rules defines the spatial typologies of the traditional city, such as the corner, the veranda, and the patio. Once superimposed, the various combinations of housing typologies are organized into clusters, which determine the collective urban space (Mendes; Celani, 2012). On the ground floor, this space is delimited by the threshold of the housing units and the street, the pedestrian paths, and two squares.

The architectural elements articulate the transition from the inside — the domestic space — to the outside — the collective space. They include the whole, its volume, dimensions, proportions, details, materiality, and surface properties, as well as the everyday experience, which is characterized by a diversity of uses and forms of appropriation. The interface elements between the domestic and the collective include physical and visual accesses that can be opened, such as porticos, staircases, ramps, gates, doors, and windows, made of materials with different levels of transparency. Other elements such as porches, niches, and building setbacks, slab projections, balconies, and spaces under stairs and between pillars can generate vitality by contributing to the character of the place and defining the topography of the ground floor. Additionally, objects such as mailboxes, signs, street names, benches, vases, and lamps contribute to the characterization of the space.

The shape and volume of the ground floor result from the integration of architecture with the numerous modes of appropriation foreseen as well as with the streetscape. Hence, the housing modules play a definitive role in determining the common space between the houses, creating a collective unit of space that connects and relates to the domestic. This space is not an abstraction — that is, a technical proposal promoted by the city or by the developer (Alexander, 1985) —, but a collective expression of the residents' will. This makes them responsible for co-producing a cohesive and authentic unit of shared space that configures the ground floor of these housing experiences, where "spaces are continuously and contiguously appropriated by all: there are no 'voids'" (Anastassakis; Cascon, 2012, p. 46-47, our translation).

In this proposal, one reads the ability of space to define a field of action with precision (Janson; Wolfrum, 2006), which characterizes the common urban ground floor. Such capacity defines openness to appropriation as something that is not equivalent to chance (Zoller, 2018). Unlike this, the interface defined on the ground floor is a space in-between created by

architectural elements. Their form and urban insertion were negotiated with future residents, resulting in a design that reflected their own identity and was an expression of their desire.

Fig. 5: Courtyard of the housing block. Source: ROSA, 2021.

Fig. 6: Accesses. Source: ROSA, 2021.

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Fig. 7: Accesses. Source: ROSA, 2021.

Fig. 8: Roof profile.
Source: ROSA, 2021.

Fig. 9: Passage. Source: ROSA, 2021.

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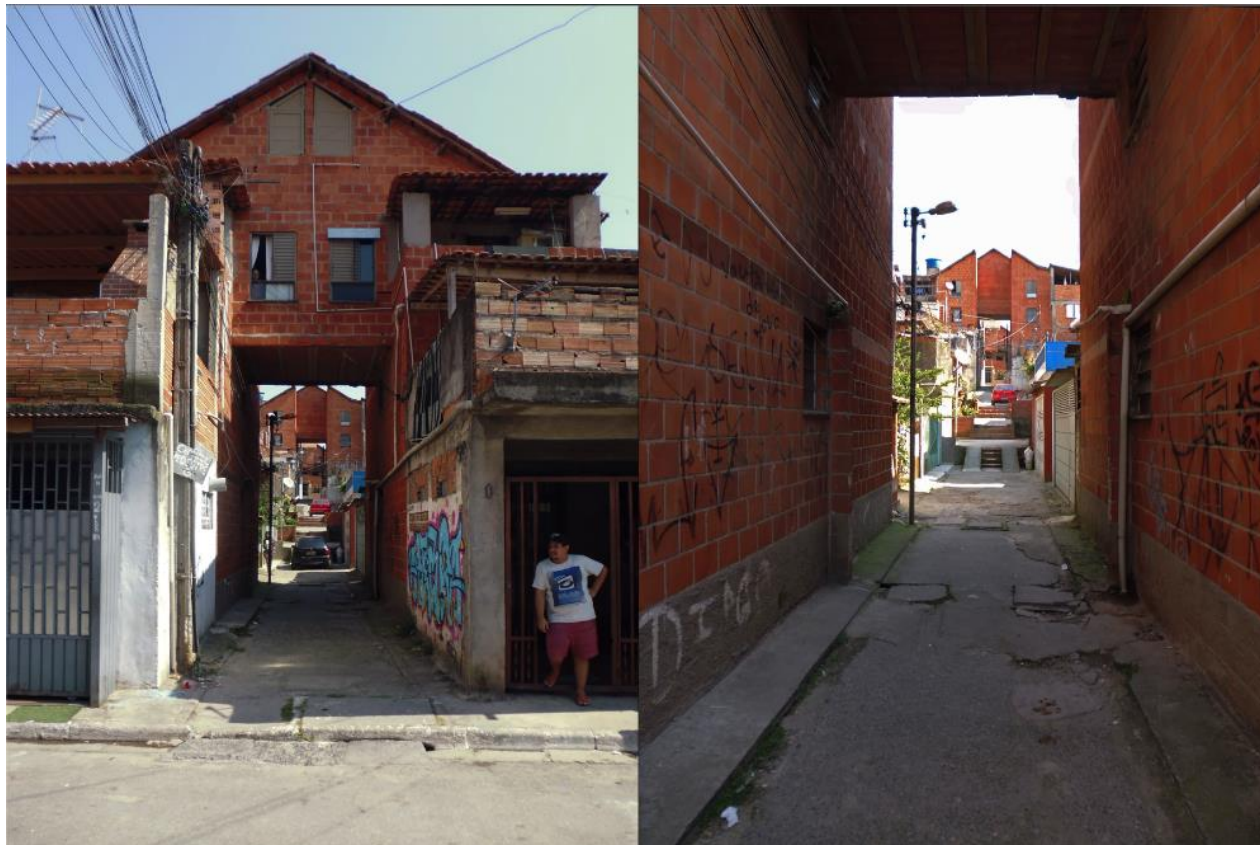**Fig. 10:** Belvedere. Source: ROSA, 2021.

Fig. 11: Portico and pedestrian path. Source: ROSA, 2021.

Fig. 12: Courtyard of the housing block. Source: ROSA, 2021.

Fig. 13: Courtyard of the housing block and assembly. Source: ROSA, 2021.

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6   Notes about the photographic gesture

Intertwined with the text, the photographic essay, carried out in 2021, also forms the basis for the argument and redescription. The aim is not to present visual evidence and translate it textually, but to develop the relationship between these two forms of knowledge production. With that, in

addition to the effort of documentation, the photographs support the redescription of existing conditions found in the city, in light of the discussion of the *Progetto di suolo*. They also include a redescription of the act of looking and possible ways of observing, analyzing, and influencing the production of space and its stories. Roland Barthes (1984) refuted the understanding of the photo as an authentic representation and credible record of the world. He draws attention to the photographic referent placed in relation to the camera, without which there would be no photography. Similarly, Vilém Flusser defines photography as a "two-dimensional description of a gesture," suggesting "considering photography itself through the photographic view" (Flusser, 2019/1991, p. 42, our translation). This approach shows that the situation is structured by the intention of the investigator, who is not outside the situation he observes: both situations interpenetrate into a single one (Flusser, 2019/1991, p. 44). In this sense, it is important to deal with the procedures adopted for carrying out the photographic gesture by the researcher for the production of images.

No photograph is neutral. The act of photographing is not something naïve, nor should it be naturalized as a fact in itself. In an operation located in the photographic event itself, the potential of photography can make something visible. The resulting image is not mere technical documentation of a constructed situation but problematizes issues that it proposes to redescribe. The first act in this direction was the critical departure from panoramic images, which simplify the complexity of a place and its agencies by distancing the gaze and flattening reality (Latour; Hermant, 1998). In contrast, the photographs were produced during site visits and were taken from the street and public pedestrian paths. We privileged central vanishing points in the images, which were framed at the height of the human eye, and recorded a sequence throughout the housing complex. The public and accessible structure of the space at the ground floor interface allowed us to enter the housing complex. From that place, the gesture of photographing was preceded by approximations with residents, seeking to provoke conversations about life in that place, their history of struggle, research, the reasons for the visits, and the act of photographing itself. The opportunities for these conversations occurred at random, according to situations experienced at the time of the visits, some of which are portrayed in the images. The photos reveal a spatiality resulting from the processes involved in that experience. Those encounters provided opportunities for continued exchanges between residents and researchers.

Although these brief notes are not intended to constitute an in-depth reflection on the photographic gesture itself, they suggest that the redescription can also be a useful exercise in asking questions about the act of photographing itself and its agency as a gesture of the gaze. Thinking about the photographic gesture as part of the redescription methodological procedure includes a series of complexities, potentialities, and challenges that can be stressed. The very gesture of photographing itself is a political instance to be problematized. It can assume the right not to participate in the hegemonic project. On the other hand, it indicates a dispute about how photography can collaborate with an act of reimagination, that is, a way to decolonize spatial imagination (Azoulay, 2019). By associating redescription with the gesture of photographing, we problematize the hegemonic ways of seeing the city.

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7   Final Considerations

Unlike the generalizing trend and the imaginaries that it carries, the conditions on the ground are less homogeneous, more unequal, turbulent, and volatile. This is due to stiff competition for urban land aimed at the construction of housing and urban development. Diverging from hegemonic thinking and its spatial products, alternative experiences of urban transformation derive from the intersection of different ways of dwelling, histories, cultural records, economic capabilities, relationships of proximity, forms of collaboration, and sharing. The resulting alternatives reveal architectures capable of transforming the everyday life. They make room for new political imaginations of the urban, in which we can indicate counter-hegemonic spatialities.

These experiences are embedded in a paradox. On the one hand, they envision an alternative to the urgent and massive demand to improve and qualify the urban structure, mitigate the environmental impact of urban development, and promote equality and citizenship. On the other hand, they coexist with a series of hegemonic urban development modalities that are highly formatted, executed by governmental and corporate agents, and therefore incapable of encompassing infrastructures and economies built and managed by communities, therefore undermining them.

The experience on screen is entangled with a body of knowledge that reveals a power that transgresses the hegemonic narratives, despite the initial scale limitations. This potency resonates in very particular situations. These are transgressions of the real that are capable of shaking up a plastered and naturalized reality. The photographic documentation, as an exercise of redescription, is intended to give visibility to a reference that allows us to disarm our perception, offering a framework for critical reflection.

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