

The politics of low-income housing in Rio de Janeiro in the light of the Minha Casa, Minha Vida program

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Introduction

In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, and after nearly 30 years of virtually no investments in public housing, the government of Brazil launched, in 2009, the Minha Casa, Minha Vida program. The undertaking promised to deliver 2.5 million housing units throughout the country in its first phase. It targets “low income” families, and its potential beneficiaries are categorized according to family income levels, divided in three ranges at the time when the program was launched: 0-3, 3-6 and 6-9 times the minimum wage, referred to, respectively as the “faixa 1”, “faixa 2”, and “faixa 3” income brackets – these are also the categories I will use in this paper. To each of these categories correspond particular sets of rules, subsidies, and institutional arrangements. The unprecedented provision of housing for families earning up to three times the minimum wage is heavily subsidized, involving very low monthly payments.

Five years and nearly three million housing units delivered throughout the country later, some of the program’s main shortcomings and challenges are by now largely documented in the scholarly and public policy literature. Initial evaluations, mostly commissioned by the Ministry of Cities but undertaken by independent researchers, converge on a series of findings and analyses. In a nutshell, the program

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produces housing units in a strict sense, that is, it does not include a regional planning component in terms of basic urban services like transportation and sanitation, or the building of schools and social services in general. That is, it produces housing units, not “the city” as advocated by scholars like Lefebvre and Castells, and generations of urbanists influenced by their ideas, as well as many social movements, advocacy groups and intellectuals that today claim rights to the city.

In this sense, the MCMV reproduces many of the shortcomings of former social housing programs. Social housing policies have often been connected to favela displacements, particularly in Rio de Janeiro. The MCMV’s direct predecessor was the Banco Nacional de Habitacao, founded in 1966 with the double purpose of garnering support from the masses that had supported the ousted regime and to set the basis financing in order to incentive the consolidation structuring of the construction sector in for the capitalist market (Bonduki 2008).

Early evaluations of the program (Ministerio das Cidades, Cardoso 2013, Cardoso e e Jaenish 2014, Lago 2013, for instance) converge on a series of findings and analyses regarding its initial results: First, the program reproduces the historic pattern of peripheralization of social housing. Second, market driven, profit making logics tend to cut costs in both the design and the construction materials used. Thus, many of the condominiums are poorly built, and present structural flaws just as soon as new residents move into them. Third, it reproduces and/or reinforces spatial and social segregation, mainly because of the condominium form and how this form entails particular relations with the vicinities of the condominiums (usually impoverished areas themselves), further pressuring the already scarce

infrastructures of the peripheries. They constitute enclaves, but contrary to the fortified enclaves of the elite, where all sorts of services render descending into the city of public spaces optional, the interdiction of mixed uses within the condominiums reinforces their remoteness and disconnectedness to the urban tissue. Fourth, many condominiums immediately go into debt with service providing companies because residents cannot afford to pay condominium fees. Finally, some MCMV condominiums have been hijacked by the territorial logics and disputes of both the drug trade and the militias. There are several reports of the drug trade and/or the militia taking over housing units or entire condominiums, either by expelling families rightfully entitled to the housing units by force or by colonizing the registration process and thus access to the apartments.

All of these challenges and/or shortcomings are particularly acute within the “Faixa 1” condominiums. This is mainly because for the higher income families, moving to Minha Casa Minha Vida apartments constitutes a wager, an investment, a project driven by the desire for homeownership. Thus, the new homeowners of the faixas 2 and 3 are generally satisfied with the program and its results.

That is not always the case within the “Faixa 1”. In fact, several social movements and advocacy groups charge the MCMV program with contributing to the so-called “return of [favela] removals” in Rio de Janeiro. This paper seeks to unpack this charge by examining the effects of a mid-course adjustment to the policy regarding the *distribution* of subsidized housing for families who earn up to three times the minimum.

The adjustment in question was the publication of Decree 140, that changed the priority rationale and eligibility requirements for distribution of housing units

produced within the “Faixa 1”. What began as an emergency measure – the inclusion and prioritizing of re-settlement of flood victims and residents of so-called “risk areas” – has been progressively hardwired into urban policy at both the state and the municipal levels, thus connecting the program with other policies. It is the effects of this particular configuration that concern me here. This is to focus on a largely marginal, unplanned and contingent dimension of the program that nonetheless, I hope to argue, has had considerable impact upon the strategies that low income families develop in order to access housing in Rio de Janeiro (perhaps more than in other cities,).

Hence I have two main goals in this paper: first, to piece together a brief account of how the MCMV came to be entwined with so-called “removals”. From the perspective of the state, it has become a fairly efficient means of displacing families, particularly in Rio de Janeiro, in function of the extensive “redevelopment” the city is undergoing in the run-up to the 2016 Olympic Games. Drawing on two brief ethnographic sketches of particular sites or situations of removal/re-locations to MCMV condominiums, chronologically organized so as to capture the incremental effects of the policy, this paper constitutes a first attempt to understand the particular historicity of current “removals” in Rio de Janeiro and how it sheds light on the strategies that low income residents have devised to secure housing in the midst of the ongoing transformations the city is undergoing.

April 2010: The Decree and the Floods

In April 2010 two events significantly transformed the conditions of possibility of low income families for accessing housing units in Rio de Janeiro’s metropolitan area. On

April 6, the Ministry of Cities published the already mentioned Decree changing the legislation that governed the existing distribution rationales for the program, in order to include as a high priority “beneficiaries” former residents of “risk areas”. Just a few days later, in the early hours of April 7 Rio de Janeiro suffered an historic storm² that left a toll of nearly 200 dead and hundreds of families homeless. The crisis brought about by the hundreds of displaced families was fueled by the commotion unleashed by images of the muddy debris of dozens of houses washed away by the floods. Under accusations of leniency for having permitted the occupation of risk areas like the Morro do Bumba, built over a deactivated garbage dump in Niteroi, the state government needed a swift response. The recently approved decree provided a window of opportunity to act fast in an election year. The state government acquired several condominiums already under construction in order to re-settle the hundreds of homeless families throughout the state. Others, like the case of the CCPL I discuss below, had their priority levels raised and the beginning of construction work of new housing for the flood victims was expedited. In 2011, yet another storm, this time in the mountainous region of the state of Rio, reinforced the urgency of “risk area” re-settlements.

Just a few months after the 2010 floods, and following the lead of the state government of using the MCMV program to re-settle victims, the municipality of Rio de Janeiro announced the construction of the Bairro Carioca, as a showcase of its social housing policies. The project for the area included a model high school, an area for commerce, and more public areas than most MCMV condominiums. Its

² fn on the storms in Rio and their capacity for transforming legislation and deeply impacting policy – 1966 (that also garnered support for the creation of the BNH, and 1988, that incorporated contractors into then smaller scale favela urbanization schemes).

central location, close to the subway and to the metropolitan train system was to do away with the heavy critique regarding the peripheral location of most MCMV condominiums, particularly since it was built to resettle people from different areas of the city. With the mayor up for reelection the following October, to continue a city hall administration that thrives on the production of hyper real renditions of redeveloped areas in the so-called “Olympic city”, it provided a better illustration to the city’s housing policy than the condominiums located out in remote areas of the west zone. The city hall has already announced the construction of the Bairro Carioca II, in a plot where squatters were violently expelled in 2014.

As what was initially a contingency measure got hardwired into the larger repertoire of urban politics in Rio – that include favela urbanization programs as well as the production of spaces and infrastructures for the upcoming Olympic games – the MCMV apartment has come to constitute a concrete possibility for many low-income families. That is because residents of many areas of the city have, in recent years and not only in function of Olympics-driven transformations in the city, witnessed a series of evictions, “removals” or “relocations” – forceful or otherwise – in the city. The construction of express bus corridors connecting sites of Olympic competitions to the airport and other areas of the city have caused significant devastation to long standing “communities” in their paths. The first re-settlements were swift and undertaken in what seemed like random patterns of negotiation and compensation. There are several reports of residents being coerced into taking apartments in far off areas in the city’s periphery.

By now, it is common knowledge how these re-location processes get played out on the ground, and this widespread knowledge has its own effects upon each

particular negotiation, as I discuss below. Re-settlements work out the same way in the case of the construction of new roads and infrastructures and for those displaced from so-called risk areas: residents can, as a rule, choose between two options: a new housing unit or financial compensation. The latter option, as a rule, is unattractive, for the parameters involved in the calculation of the compensation only ascribe value to the “benfeitorias”, i.e, the “improvements” upon the plot, disregarding its land market value. The apartment unit, in turn, has its own shortcomings: the MCMV apartments are small, usually at 42 square meters each. Many families come from houses with several floors, and are used to autoconstruction techniques as means of multiplying space as new generations come along. Thus moving into the MCMV apartment requires a series of measures in order to spatially translate housing arrangements in favelas, occupations, or other forms of low-income housing and thus configure acceptable exchanges for residents. I will return to this issue shortly

The Faixa 1 apartment

Many of us who study housing stress the particularity of housing markets for their unique condensation of meanings, practices and value producing mechanisms: both object and artifact, condensing layers of use and exchange value, and, in the case of social housing its double valence as right and commodity in urban Brazil. In the case of MCMV apartments produced for “Faixa 1” families, this overdetermination is exacerbated in the light of three dimensions of the re-location/removal process that also reveal moral dimensions of the provision of housing to low-income families in Rio.

First, the new tenants, in order to be awarded the keys to their apartments, do not just open the door and move in. They only receive the keys to their apartments once they have concluded what the “empresas sociais” responsible for coordinating the “trabalho social” (social work) involved in such relocations call “cursos de convivencia” (acquaintance courses?) and many residents refer to as “curso para aprender a morar em condominio” (“course for learning how to live in condominiums”). These courses are designed to “teach” residents about the rights and duties involved in living in a “condominium” and often include conflict mediation workshops. While there is nothing properly new about this – in previous favela removal schemes like the Parques Proletarios of the 1940s, the displacement of residents to the Cruzada Sao Sebastiao in the 1950s analogous lessons in morality were also mandatory (see Goncalves) – it also reinforces the boundaries between social housing and market housing.

Second, and particularly in the case of those living in risk areas or removed to make way for infrastructural works, negotiations prior to resettlement tend to be a long process wrought with conflict. More often than not these are processes that wear on, and as they do, they galvanize communities (that were not necessarily close knit or conflict free to begin with). Most of the cases I have encountered or heard of are areas that had their removal announced several times over the past decades, so there is always doubt lingering as to whether this time removal threats are for real. Even as the bureaucratic processes advance, things on the ground seem to stall, as technical and incomprehensible delays are broken only by renewed registering processes (the “cadastros”) and moments of sheer urgency once things get moving. As negotiations get embattled, the state usually resorts to individual

negotiations; the ruins of houses of people already relocated are left exposed and begin to attract rats and mosquitoes as vegetation takes them over – the last to leave end up happy to do so, when they do not take any offer to get out of the debris. These conflicts have to do with different perspectives on the “removal”/relocation process: They are processes that wear on, and often this is converted into a state strategy for convincing or manufacturing consent among dissidents of the removal (dissidents, in turn, are often functioning according to the same speculative logic, but follow different rationales in pursuing their interests).

Finally, there is a five-year moratorium on monetary transactions involving the MCMV apartments. This moratorium opens up a space for myriad speculative, informal practices and markets – not surprisingly, prohibition does not stop monetary transactions involving the apartments; rather, it shapes new markets and forms of exchange. Perhaps even more significantly, the MCMV apartment and one’s right to it becomes the object of immediate appropriations and speculation. It impinges upon former modes of producing monetary and symbolic value attached to housing, and inaugurates new forms of non-monetary exchange that resemble but are not reduced to clientistic relations. In what remains of this paper, I provide glimpses of these shifts, drawing on two ethnographic cases studies.

Thus, if from the perspective of the production of housing, the MCMV apartments tend to blur the boundaries between market oriented housing and social housing, if we look into the distribution of Faixa 1 MCMV apartments there is a certain moralizing stance on the distribution of apartments reinforces these boundaries.

The CCPL

One of the first “communities” benefited by the PORTARIA was the CCPL. The CCPL was never a “favela” in the common usage of the term. It was an occupation of a large site that originally housed a milk processing plant between the late 1940s and the late 1990s. Located along the train tracks of Rio’s old suburban industrial zone, the factory shut down when the company moved production out to Sao Goncalo, in Rio’s metropolitan region. In late 2000, a few hundred families occupied the former industrial site, and used the old buildings as shelter for the houses they built over the years. By 2010, there were twelve hundred families living there, and the housing units constituted a dynamic market, both in terms of property “ownership” and of rental agreements. I have told the full story elsewhere (see Cavalcanti e Fontes 2011, Cavalcanti 2014, forthcoming 2015 and documentary film *Favela Fabril*, 2012), so this is the short version: the occupation was hit very hard by the 2010 floods. Because the main community leader there had close ties to the then vice-governor and state secretary of public works, she managed to raise the priority level of the CCPL re-settlement.

What matters here, analytically, is an incident that we witnessed very early into our research: it was August 2010, and we had barely begun to grasp the complexity of the situation there. I had experience doing research in the “consolidated” favelas of the city, that have their own temporalities, materialities and claims to legitimacy voiced through long consolidated anti-removal narratives. This was different: as an occupation whose residents referred to themselves as “invaders” (thus denoting the scarce politicization of residents’ own narratives) and they did not perceive their houses in the “community” as the source of material or

even symbolic investments. Rather, the occupation – like so many others in Rio, beginning in the 1990s – was experienced as an ephemeral condition: at worst, a temporary stopover on the way to more permanent housing elsewhere; at best, as the pathway to a new apartment – as had been the fate of other occupations of old industrial sites in the region, even before the MCMV and its April 2010 decree. On this particular morning, it was obvious Candida was busy. She was in high spirits, wearing a T-shirt that depicted Saint George on a horse, sword in hand in tones of red and white. Her assistant stood by her side, and they were handling the residents' registers we had come to know well from previous visits. The "register" or "cadastro" consisted of a pile of library cards, each one comprising the basic information of each head of household in the "invasao"/"comunidade". Each card referred to a family/housing unit, and it was comprised of a 3x4 cm photo, full name, CPF, personal identification number of the head of each household. Candida had devised the system in order to anticipate the "trabalho social", the routines of which she was already familiar with because she had already followed similar resettlements in the surrounding communities of the Manguinhos and Arara favela complexes.

Candida was ecstatic because, as she put it, she had been "given" some 300 apartments in what she called the "Coca-cola" condominium to distribute among CCPL residents. The condominium in question had been built by the MCMV program, on the outskirts of the favela "complex" of Alemão – on a plot that had previously housed a coca-cola factory. As they went through residents' files, they separated them into two different piles – those that were provisionally "in", and those who did not stand a chance. They deliberated on each file after a brief exchange: first they

identified the family or household, often based on particular episodes or interactions, and in a quick exchange largely based on moral statements sealed residents' fates. So-and-so has "not suffered enough yet", a second head of family "pays the association" and "is hardworking". There were very few grey zones: that woman is "a bitch", a "junkie", a "crackhead", a "vagabunda..." or "good mother", "batalhadora", "church going" and so forth. Stories of people's lives were thus reduced to chance interactions turned into one phrase or judgment, their placement on that desk opening or foreclosing the possibility of the "apartment". Even as I was completely enthralled by the proceedings, I could not help feeling exasperated about how they let us keep the camera on. The future of the PAC and MCMV programs were at stake there, on that desk, in those piles, under the gaze of our cameras.

The fact was that Candida had over one thousand families and 300 apartments to distribute among them. Now, power over apartments was not new to her. She had managed to place her aunt and there were rumors of other family members former negotiations in the region. In part, this is because Candida was effective, and she knew how the system worked. By the time she had been granted the apartments, she had a record of all families living there, while the "trabalho social" was just beginning to reassemble a team and in the last instance was highly dependent on her and her ordering of space. Time was of the essence; the October elections loomed just a few months ahead and she knew that this was a unique window of opportunity. Thus Candida was granted full powers to decide who was entitled to the MCMV apartment.

In the end, Candida's own power and influence would be considerably undermined by the constitution of the CCPL as condominium. Her powers got

dispersed along with the former tenants of the occupation. Many of the residents who had initially been placed in Candida's "no" pile ended up getting their apartments in the end. But, all in all, it took them four years to get the keys to their new apartments, three years more than those worthy of an apartment in Candida's eyes.

The Parque Carioca

The residents of Vila Uniao de Curicica, a small community – favela, in this case – of some nine hundred families as of October 2012, located very close to where the Olympic Park and the Athletes' Village are currently under construction in Rio's west zone, first heard about their community's impending removal on YouTube. In January of that same year, Transit Department had released a video to announce the construction of the Transolimpica expressway. It featured a traffic engineer in a helicopter flying over the projected expressway pathway, which tore through the city at an astounding pace. At a certain point, the digital yellow lines that simulated the expressway path literally ran over Vila Uniao de Curicica, instantly raising questions about the community's viability in the Olympic design scheme.

Later that year, in November 2012, I was present at a meeting set up for the purpose of officially announcing the near complete removal of the community. The current president of the association of Vila Uniao was a young woman with very little political experience, so she brought along the woman who had preceded her in office, one of the founders of the community who had led the association for decades on end. As Vania, the young woman, gnawed away at her nails, Dona Sonia, with watery eyes, swiftly began to organize her demands on the spot in the light of

the new scenario. First she spoke of how her own life history was entwined with the community whose development she had witnessed first hand. But that was only a preamble to a well-organized speech on the community's own conditions for the inevitable removal: she immediately demanded that they only be relocated once their final destination was concluded³, and that the final destination be nearby. Like other favelas of the region, the Vila Uniao had a considerable rental market of quitinetes, one room studios often rented by newcomers to the city, attracted by jobs in the construction industry.

Once the removal was announced, the directions, aims and tactics of speculation adopted by residents were radically transformed: each and every household potentially became the pathway to a MCMV apartment. Because property owners could only be compensated for up to two households, new tactics were quickly developed: on the one hand, families living in large houses scrambled to build new kitchens and bathrooms (that constitute the parameters for defining a household), opening up independent entrances so as to multiply the number of households within a given plot, and thus the number of apartments to be allotted to each family. The second reaction was that many quitinetes came on the market, as some of the former tenants went into debt in order to purchase the small households that now potentially presented pathways to a MCMV apartment. Tenants who did not manage to secure their rights to a house by becoming property owners will have to find a place to rent somewhere else, probably further out in the periphery.

³ Dona Sonia drew here on several experiences throughout the city, like the CCPL, in which residents

In this particular case, those who speculated by waiting were rewarded. The first group to leave the favela got transferred to a MCMV condominium in the Colonia Juliano Moreira. Those who waited out were in for a surprise last month. On a Wednesday morning when they had a meeting scheduled with the Housing Department they were packed into buses and driven to a middle class club where a party awaited them. The ceremony's purpose was to present them to their new home: the Parque Carioca, a Minha Casa Minha Vida "popular condominium" located on the Estrada dos Bandeirantes, a middle class address, a middle class condo, equipped with middle class amenities (the maintenance of which provisionally paid for by the City Hall). The representative of the mayor and next candidate to office personally went down to the ceremony to oversee and take credit for residents' happy moment. Not only would they get their keys to the new apartments but the apartments would come equipped with low energy spending kitchen appliances and a complimentary Easter egg waiting in the new refrigerator as a present from the mayor.

The one hundred and forty five families in this situation, who had waited out long enough without joining the resistance movement, came home to find an even more galvanized community. Those who remained now wanted out; they also wanted apartments in the Parque Carioca. The resistance movement was obliged to change its rhetoric, and the "primeval" community ties that connected them to the locality were substituted for the right to a just financial compensation. The dispute wears on, one month later, as the favela now begins to change into a large ruin, even as compensation negotiations are still underway.

Concluding remarks on ongoing processes

The ethnographic case studies I briefly sketched here present more analytical leads than I have been able to follow in this brief paper. By way of conclusion, therefore, I can only indicate a few implications of the processes described here to understanding the current conjuncture of low income housing markets and arrangements in Rio de Janeiro, but particularly to the analyses of these processes. With all the particularities of these cases, the situations they reveal remind us that the very endurance of the MCMV program, and the institutionalization of new displacement rules (that are, moreover intrinsically provisional, given the emergency driven context in which they are claimed) affect low-income families trajectories, expectations and their daily wagers in the attempt of constructing a better future through homeownership (I have discussed this in details elsewhere, cf. Cavalcanti 2009).

This, in turn, forces us to rethink customary assumptions about the field of social, or low income housing in Brazil. In naming the problem field as “low income housing markets and arrangements” my intent is to highlight the many possibilities, strategies and combinations that poor families have devised and incorporated as possibilities or virtualities over the years, that include moving betwixt and between the formal/informal divide, taking advantage of sliding in the interstices of different but connected logics, and modes of ordering space.

This preliminary conclusion, in turn, is more of a starting point for a renewed agenda of research on public and/or low income housing. It reminds us that what is going on on the ground in Rio is more complex than a mere “return” of [favela] removals. While there are numerous parallels and continuities between the BNH-led

removals of the 1960s and 70s and the displacements effected with (not by) the MCMV program, a more systematic historical comparison between the two moments will certainly reveal that the favela-conjunto removal followed particular institutional designs, political purposes and ideological underpinnings that resonate with but differ from current removals or resettlements to MCMV condominiums, even if the spatial effects of peripheralization of social housing are strikingly similar. In both cases, the BNH and the MCMV programs, investment in public programs of low income housing find their foundations and rationales intricately tied to efforts to enhance the performance of the construction industry as a pathway to national economic growth. In both cases, they are – or become, in the case of the MCMV program – linked to public policies targeting Rio's favelas. But low income housing is not just about the favelas and their removals.

When one looks into poor people's housing trajectories in urban Brazil, as recent historical and ethnographic research does, (Fischer, Gonçalves, Rosa, Cavalcanti) we find that movements between "favelas", "conjuntos", "invasions", "loteamentos" and the myriad worlds of Brazil's urban peripheries are key to understanding how the world of low income housing arrangements and markets work in practice, on the ground. These markets and arrangements, moreover, are not at all static: favelas, loteamentos and peripheries "consolidate", housing projects become "favelizados", the drug trade split between different factions exercises sovereignty over some spaces, the so-called militias over others – and moving between these different social spaces has serious implications upon daily life. This is a richer and more diverse universe than the prevalence of the "favela" in social theory lets on, particularly in Rio de Janeiro. This is a timid first step in that direction,

but the larger problem field remains to be ethnographically unpacked and scrutinized.

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