

**Meia-água: The Configuration of Land Plots and Houses in Low-Income Real Estate in  
Rio de Janeiro**

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The new anthropology of the house that has emerged over recent years set itself a clear objective: to think residence and kinship together. True enough, residence had already appeared in studies of kinship, and kinship in studies of residence, a long time ago, but the discipline soon divided into *kinship studies* and *household studies*: that is, those who saw residence as a simple parameter within deeper structures, the structures of kinship, and those who saw residence as the basis of social reproduction. Lévi-Strauss was the first to attempt to overcome this duality, inscribed in the very concepts of kinship and household, by reviving and reworking the concept of *maison*. This approach had the merit of transforming residence into an active principle in the genesis of kinship, though the analytic language used was outdated (Lévi-Strauss 1992). One of the various problems with the *maison* model lay in its neglect of the physical and architectural dimensions of the house (Carsten, Hugh-Jones 1995). Another problem was that it left little space for a dynamic analysis of the relations between kinship and residence: the 'maison' emerged as the outcome of an interplay of abstract principles, such as unification and bilateral filiation. Louis Marcelin responded to this with a constructivist approach, analyzing the relations between kinship and residence as a process, a symbolic and practical construction (Marcelin 1996). This is the approach I shall take here.

The case studied in this paper concerns the *meia-água*, or mono-pitched roof, a type of residential construction extremely popular in the region where I conduct my research, a housing development far from the center of Rio called Jardim Maravilha (JM), inhabited by a low-income population whose access to urban services is still very precarious – hence why, in bureaucratic jargon, this area is referred to as an irregular development. While the poverty, precarious services and also the widespread self-construction of houses may recall favelas, the difference resides in the fact that the land was legally divided into lots, intersected by a network of streets. In both cases, the house comprises a central element in social organization. When it comes to studying houses in working-class universes, though, we encounter a classic problem: can the working class develop autonomous socio-symbolic practices, or are these practices always an

effect of the domination borne by these classes? As we shall see, the *meia-água* would appear to conform to a type of dwelling prompted solely by the *choix du nécessaire*. However, even in more precarious kinds of dwelling like the *meia-água*, we find socio-symbolic processes at play, processes that simultaneously involve configurations of domestic life, cost management strategies, and a hierarchization of architectural forms.

### **The ideal of having one's own house**

Similar to other popular Brazilian contexts (Woortmann 1982), the ideology of the nuclear family has a pronounced influence on the residents of JM, shown, for example, in the recurrent opposition between *familia* (family) and *parentes* (relatives or kin) in their dialogues. The family encompasses a husband-wife couple, united by a tie of alliance, and their children. Relatives, on the other hand, are all the people related to the family by some tie of consanguinity or affinity. This opposition commonly echoes in singular fashion in the life histories of the residents. César, a self-employed worker close to retirement, used to have a *casa* (house) before coming to JM, but he left in order to not have to live close to his mother-in-law any longer. “*Those living close to their relatives have a very serious problem,*” he told me, “*you end up living their problems and they, yours,*” thereby presuming that his relatives problems were not his own.

The house could therefore be seen as the concrete realization of the nuclear model, the ‘physical counterpart’ of the nuclear family, as Woortmann would say. However, the concept of the nuclear family contains various biases, already identified by the historian Lutz Berkner (in Yanagisako 1979), such as supposing a direct correlation between residential choices and family organization, and reducing the interpretation of family life to the study of genealogical relations – biases typical of structural-functionalism (Marcelin 1996). In fact, even when the *relatives/family* divide prevails, domestic relations display a some degree of complexity due to the fact that these relations, in the context of the housing development, are constructed at the level of the *terreno*, land plot. In my fieldwork, I came across two-story buildings located on the same terrain, occupied by parents and married sons with their respective wives. To my eyes, these buildings held multiple family groups. For my interlocutors, though, they were divided into various houses: in Bernard’s case, for example, there was the lower house, which was his, and the

upper house, which belonged to his older son, while the other sons *lived with* him – it is not enough to live in the same building or on the same terrain to *live with* your parents, you have to live in the same house or *casa*.

Returning to César, who left his first house because he wanted to live further away from his *relatives*, how he explained this difficult co-habitation is instructive: “*My house was separated by a wall from hers. We communicated through the wall, there was even a hole in a wall that meant I could see her living room from my own.*” In other words, the *problem* was not only with the category of *relative*, it also concerned the practical negotiation of boundaries between domestic spaces. Hence these two examples provided an alternative to the model of the nuclear family: rather than the house being the ‘physical counterpart’ of the nuclear family, it is the house that constructs the family as a nuclear entity: in other words, the nuclear family only exists through manipulations that are simultaneously symbolic and architectonic, manipulations that turn on the notion of *privacy*. Next the case of Arnaldo: today separated, he had four children, two boys and two girls. Some years ago, the youngest son got a woman from JM pregnant, which led to her being expelled from her parents’ house. With nowhere to live, the couple remained on the *terrain* of the husband’s father, Arnaldo. When his granddaughter was born, Arnaldo decided to *divide* the house with his son: the large bedroom and bathroom would belong to his son, while Arnaldo would have the living room and kitchen. He therefore *blocked up* the door between the bedroom and living room. I asked Arnaldo whether he had blocked it up because it was too ‘cramped’: “*It wasn’t cramped. It’s just that there’s no way, dude, living on top of each other; privacy, there’s just no privacy, you know. You’ve got to have some privacy, right? You want to walk around your own house normally, you want to receive visitors, not have everyone mixing. I’ll tell you something: quem casa quer casa, anyone who marries wants a house, that’s what I’ve always told you, quem casa quer casa. So I told him: you can have that house, then, son.*” Arnaldo didn’t stop there: after he blocked up the door, he opened another one in the old room, now his son’s house, so the latter could enter via the *quintal* (yard). Still not satisfied, he closed up this doorway, demolished a section of the wall that surrounded the terrain and made another *gate* so that his son’s family would have *their own entrance* (as the terrain is located on a street corner, each gate now opens onto a different road).

Arnaldo's case reveals a series of transformations, at once symbolic and architectural, needed for the relations between his son, daughter-in-law and future grandchild to form a family, in accordance with working-class ideology. Hence the need to think of family life not on the basis of a 'model' like that of the nuclear family, but through symbolic and architectural processes that construct family life (McCallum & Bustamante 2012) – with the house being one such process. Arnaldo's case also shows that *privacy* is connected to the *freedom* to behave however you want inside your own domestic space: you can invite whoever you want to visit. The *housewife* (*dona de casa*) Elma was outraged by the fact that neighbors along her road had recently begun to sell their the upper floors, or *lajes*, of their houses to anyone who wanted to build on top. "*Where else have you seen this, selling laje!*" Dona Elma exclaimed. "*I couldn't do that, I couldn't give away my freedom... Who can stand living one on top of the other?*"

In effect, it is not enough to have a house, you have to have *freedom*. This explains the paradox of renting: someone who rents a place to live, has a house but has no freedom. Families at the beginning of their life-cycle very often have little choice but to rent a place to live, though, since this is the only way they can get a house. Renting takes away the freedom of families because it puts a huge strain on the household budget: when you pay rent, you *passa-se sufoco*, or 'suffocate.' César was scathing about rent, having spent years renting houses: "*If you don't have a place to live, it's slavery! When you rent where you live, you're a slave to rent... And look, the laws are made for those renting out, when you fall behind on your rent, you pay a fortune.*" Whether due to the amount paid, or the fact that you cannot fall behind, rent leads to *suffocation*. Additionally, those who rent cannot carry out repairs or improvements to the house without asking the owner of the house. In sum, money spent on rent is "*money thrown away, wasted, lost forever,*" "*rent is money that you spend and get nothing in return!*" César said. Indeed, the idea that rent is a payment for a certain kind of service, namely the offer of housing, is not always accepted in the popular universe I studied. So, you can go through a tough period, or 'suffocate,' after buying a terrain, due to the loan payments or the construction costs, but in this case the return for this hardship is the promise of a *patrimônio* (*patrimony*), not only for yourself but for your children too. Dona Eurídice, a *family mother who lives with* her four children, ended up *renting a place to live* for the first time in her life after she got married: before then she had *lived in the country*, meaning she had always lived in her own house. Paying rent

“was a real bother,” “every month paying money you don’t have,” though the rent was “really cheap” and the house “very good.” She wanted to *get out of renting*, therefore, and eventually moved with her husband to JM, where she suffered a lot at first due to the housing development’s lack of amenities and services. But owning her own house had one incomparable advantage over renting: it was a *patrimony*, in the double sense of a capital reserve, which earns money if rented out, and an asset to be handed down. “*We’re already getting on a bit*,” she explained to me, talking about her son, “so [...] *this will be his patrimony. When we’ve gone, he’ll have a source of income too for him and for his children.*”

### ***Meia-água and social hierarchies***

While everyone wants to *escape renting*, not everyone *has the means* to make a *good house*, in other words, a two-story house with an exterior finish. The months following the purchase of a terrain very often comprise a period in the life-cycle of families during which they ‘suffocated.’ They have to repay the loan on the terrain and the house construction has a cost that can take a toll on the family budget for a long time. They therefore need to develop strategies to meet these expenses, such as adjusting the volume of household spending, saving on everything *non-essential*, or reducing building costs by beginning with a *casinha*, a small house made from cheap materials. There are various ways to make a *casinha*: one of them is to construct a house with just one room, called a *cômodo*. Here one single room serves as living room, bedroom and kitchen, with the bathroom located outside. The *cômodo* does not even require a *structure* (foundations and concrete columns), meaning that expenditure on construction materials can be minimized. Nonetheless, there is nothing stopping the family from wanting to invest more in the project: Dona Eurídice and her husband plastered and painted the walls of their *cômodo*, and even covered it with a concrete floor above. “*I said all the time: hey everyone, let’s make a nice house, even if it’s small, so it’s not a shack, okay*,” she said laughing. Her husband added: “*yes, favela!*” “*Favela! It can’t be a favela.*” Dona Eurídice repeated, “*let’s make a nice house. Let’s make it slowly, we built a cômodo, with the idea of enlarging it later.*” Here, the *financial squeeze*, which prevented Dona Eurídice from building the *house* she had always dreamed of, combined with her desire for it not to be mistaken for another kind of dwelling, seen to be lower in the hierarchy of types of dwelling.

Another way of making a small house is the *meia-água*. No consensus exists among residents concerning what a *meia-água* is: whenever I asked, I always received different answers in reply. “*Meia-água is... is a house built at the back,*” Bernard told me. He continued: “*I don’t know why it’s called meia-água [half-water], it should be called a meia-casa [half-house] shouldn’t it?*” The builder Júlio, a *long-term resident* in JM, replied differently: “*Meia-água, is a small house! It has a bedroom, living room, kitchen, bathroom, but there’s only one bedroom! [...] It’s called a meia-água because there’s just one bedroom. Now, when there’s no upper concrete floor, it’s also a meia-água. If there’s an upper floor, then it’s a house, the person immediately calls it a house.*” The most articulate reply came from César: “*it’s called a meia-água because the rainfall drains on one side only [...], it’s a meia-água because it has a small roof that slopes to one side only, it’s enough to protect the person from the weather, he can live there [...]* They live in the *meia-água*, and they think it’s a house, but it’s not a house, it’s a *meia-água*. They call it a *meia-água* because it isn’t a house, [...] it only has three walls, they use the boundary wall to support the sloped roof.” However, when I asked people to point out the *meia-águas* found around the housing development, the same kind of dwelling was identified with some frequency: a small one-storied building, located at the *rear* of the terrain, occupying the entire width of the plot and supported by the boundary wall separating the property from the other terrain behind it, with the roof sloping inward towards the yard of the terrain.

More importantly, though, my interlocutors always more or less agreed that the *meia-água* was not exactly a *casa* (house) – indeed, the word is just as ambiguous as the category *casinha* (little house) itself, which refers not only to a small house but also to a tiny house, a house that has not yet attained the status of a *casa*. The presence of the prefix *meio* in the word gave rise to the wordplay between *meia-água* and *meia-casa*, half-water, half-house. In fact, this prefix represents a serious problem, including for the architects who use the category *meia-água*, since, according to them, a *meia-água* is a small building, whether or not used as a dwelling, with a mono-pitched roof, with the word *água* (water) designating here the flat surface of the roof. Strictly speaking, therefore, a *meia-água* is a building with a single pitch. By contrast, a house with a gable roof or *duas águas*, an expression common among architects but seldom used in my fieldwork area, is a house that possesses dual-pitched roof: that is, two sloped sections of roofing. The main point here is that the *meia-água* category is used primarily in the con-

text of colonial architecture: in Brazilian society of the seventeenth century, the house already functioned as a physical expression of social differences among inhabitants, and the higher the person's status, the larger their house, and the larger its number of *águas* (pitches) had to be. The house with four pitches thus became a symbol of power and prestige, one of the architectural formulas preferred by mansions, while the gable roofed house was the most common model, especially in urban areas. The category *meia-água*, as can be seen, mixes two dimensions: architectural, since it defines the building by the structural form of its roof, and social, since the norm would be dual-pitched. A house with one pitch only becomes a house that fails to satisfy the norm, something like a house split down the middle.

This category, therefore, is deeply connected to the way in which Brazilian society hierarchized dwellings, since the *meia-água* typically occupied the least favored location: the *fundos* or rear. Right at the beginning of colonization, the tendency of the dominant class was to place the kitchen, a source of heat and dirt, to the rear of the terrain. As the centuries went by, the *fundos* became not just the place of the kitchen, but also the bathroom, the stables, workshops and the place where slaves and servants slept (Goulart Reis Filho 1970). However these spaces were not always detached from the main building, as happened in the nineteenth century, when the *meia-água* (also known as a *edícula* by the architects) became a recurrent element of the Brazilian urban landscape: “the traces of the old slave quarters” had been transferred outside the house and were now found in a small independent building, called an *edícula* or *meia-água*.

The same hierarchical organization of domestic space, with an opposition between front and rear, is found in working-class worlds today (Heye 1980): the kitchen and bathroom tend to be located to the *rear*, along with other *dirty* activities. Moreover, the people who build *quitinetes* (bedsits) on their terrain with the aim of renting to *strangers*, very seldom place them at the *front* of the property: the preference will be for the *rear*. Even if this is merely symbolic. Carlos, owner of a bar, has a house and two *quitinetes* on his terrain: although his house is at the rear and the bedsits closer to the front, when he came to write the address of the bedsits on the gate, he added the word *fundos* to the house number. It is not unusual, therefore, for former *meias-águas*, located in the *fundos*, to become a bedsit, which explains a the confusion people some-

times experience – “*it must be what we today call a bedsit?*” I was asked by a housewife who has lived in the neighborhood a short time.

### **Configuring domestic-family life through *meia-água***

If we take as a reference point what I previously called an “ideal type of *meia-água*,” it is easy to understand the success that this architectural formula had among residents: 1) it amounts to a small building, which does not require a *structure*, 2) the use of the boundary wall to the rear of the property as an interior wall enables less expenditure on bricks, 3) it is simple to make, given that the roof uses the inner and outer walls as support. However, the *meia-água* is not exactly the *house* in which people want to live: it is another housing solution that people hope is temporary, although it can become definitive for those ‘without the means.’ Hence, many families who arrived in JM, ‘fleeing from rent,’ began to live in a *meia-água*, but did not always continue in the *meia-água*: by placing the *meia-água* at the rear of the terrain, the families preserved their freedom to build another house at the front, in the most valorized area of the terrain. After moving to the *meia-água*, and as ‘money enters’ or the ‘family grows,’ the house is gradually built in the desired area until the family is ready to move into it. As well as its potential architectural weaknesses, the *meia-água* also suffers from not being a *planned* house: more than this, it is a house that does not provide its owner with the possibility of being expanded in the future, a possibility associated with the existence of a *laje*, a concrete upper floor covering the house. The *laje* represents the prospect of its future expansion; it enables a second story to be built, and it is difficult for a house with just one story to be considered *good, well-made* by the rest of the area’s residents. Conversely, a roof is added when the owners consider that the structure of the building need not be altered any further.

Residents pursue various strategies, therefore, in order to match their projects to the reality of the *meia-água*. They may simply abandon the *meia-água* after moving to the *casa* (house), in which case the *meia-água* remains ‘shut’ until a new use is found. The *meia-água* can also be demolished: César bought a terrain that already had a *meia-água* in the front portion. He lived in the two-roomed *meia-água* until the house was ready. Afterwards the presence of the *meia-água* began to bother César, who decided to demolish its walls and use it as a workshop. However, César’s project is to *demolish* the entire *meia-água* and build another at

the back of the property, which also serve as a workshop. *“It’s an opportunity for me to remove these two rooms that I bought when only they existed. Because the house is completely different, the project is completely different to having these rooms here. They disfigure what I want to do here.”* However, it is unnecessary for their to be a *project* to *demolish* the *meia-água*: the very expansion of the house, which very often grows towards the rear of the property, can end up swallowing the *meia-água*. The walls are then *demolished* and the *meia-água* becomes a room in the *house*. Another solution is to build on top the *meia-água*, swapping the roof for a *laje*: this substitution alone is enough for the *meia-água* to longer be considered a *meia-água* but a *house*.

It is also possible to find a use for the *meia-água*. In some cases it is turned into a workshop, a place where activities linked to *work* are carried out, such as sewing or equipment repairs. This, for instance, is César’s project with the *meia-água* at the rear. Another way of making use of the *meia-água* is to turn it into a bedsit, that is, put it up for rent. Although the residents of the housing development have an extremely negative view of rent, it is rare for none of them to formulate the project of a bedsit (*quitinete*) on the terrain. This operation poses a degree of danger, though: the risk of having ‘strangers’ in your house, living with people who are not part of the ‘family,’ nor ‘relatives.’ This risk demands manipulation of the symbolic and architectural boundaries of the house in order to prevent the stranger having to live with the family. The main solution is to create a separate entrance, which implies a change in the project of the house. *“For us to rent,”* Eurídice said, *“we have to make another project, isolate the house [...]. Just now it’s the same entrance. But to rent a house, we have to do this in the future, we have to make an independent entrance [...]. And after we isolate the house so that it’s totally independent, maybe we too are...”* In fact, transforming the *meia-água* into a *quitinete*, a *casinha alugada* (little rented house), has a both a financial cost, since construction work is needed to make an independent entrance, and a symbolic cost, since the bedsit requires a change in the project of the house.

There is also the possibility of making the *meia-água* available to rent to a family member or a relative who is going through difficult times (‘suffocating’). The case of Jair, Bernard’s brother-in-law, is one of the most interesting. When he bought his terrain in Jardim Maravilha, he began to build a *meia-água* in the rear of the property with the help of his father-in-law,

where he stayed with his family for some time. Then his mother arrived who wanted to live close to her children who lived in Rio de Janeiro. Living in Jair's house was not a viable option, though: "*But there was already, I mean, my family, right, you know, it was a pain having her live here with me, so... I called my brothers and we built three rooms for her here.*" However the mother did not stay very long, she went back to the *roça* (country) and the *meia-água* remained shut for a while. Later Jair rented it to a couple who ended up in trouble with the police, leading him to close it again. "*Then my brother-in-law [Bernard] needed it [...]. He married and [...] came to live here. So we expanded it a bit. We made a few rooms here. He has suddenly bought the terrain where he's living [now], he was finding things difficult, his wife was pregnant, so he lived here for a time. Later he built his own house [...] He was still living down there, so I went there, I began to work on this house, right, laying a few bricks, little by little. I carried on building slowly until I eventually built this house here.*" Today, then, Jair is building a second floor above the house where he lives, what was his mother's *meia-água*, with the idea of renting the lower floor and moving to the upper, while the *meia-água* to the rear of the property remained *closed* until it became a storehouse for his son to keep his materials.

At the same time that the *meia-água* forms part of the strategies designed to minimize building costs, keeping alive the *project* of building a *house* in accordance with the needs of the *family*, it can serve to construct an arrangement of *families* within the same terrain, without compromising their *privacy*. In other words, in order to connect nuclear families united by some tie of kinship, the *meia-água*, as a low-cost *casinha* (little house), ends up being an adequate solution. Here we have to return to the discussion of the nuclear family: traditionally it was seen as the produce of a dissolution of ties with the extended kindgroup, accompanying the triumph of modern individualism. However, some studies of domestic groups carried out in Europe not only questioned this narrative, they pointed to the role of the extended family in maintaining the nuclear family (Segalen 1984). Or, to use less structural-functionalist language, the construction of the nuclear family "continually forms part of processes that individuate – in this context, obtain and maintain a house – and processes that relate" (McCallum & Bustamante 2012).

Recent studies have shown, following on from Marcelin's pioneering work on black families in the Recôncavo region of Bahia (Marcelin 1999), that this relationship ideally occurred between houses united by the same "ideology of the family and kinship," a type of arrangement

baptized a “configuration of houses.” The same phenomenon is reproduced in JM. Various operations linked to the act of *caring* thus involve house configurations: *caring* for a pregnant daughter-in-law; *caring* for children; *caring* for a widowed mother. While these actions principally involve *women*, men too also perform an important role, for example when there is some *men’s work* to do: change a light fitting, mend a cracked pipe, reform part of the house. Ideally the *family father* can do everything by himself, but a *family father* may be absent, or perhaps is too unwell to do this work. In other cases, the *family father* lacks the technical knowhow needed, or the tasks requires the collaboration of various *men*, hence the necessity to *chamar colegas*, call on his mates to *help*. There are also cases in which the father calls on his mates not because he needs their help, but to help them, knowing that they are looking for *work* or *passando sufoco*: that is, going through a difficult patch.

In his work, Marcelin is emphatic in stressing that “the configuration of houses does not refer to an immediately localizable grouping,” perhaps to avoid the reader confusing the concept with the extended family. Indeed, spatial proximity does not serve to identify a configuration of houses, although in the empirical descriptions, the *road* served this function. While, in the case of JM, the configurations are also non-localizable, the *terrain* has a centripetal effect on them. It is through the terrain, as Jair’s history demonstrates, that *houses* united by the same ideology of the family can be distributed in the same space without compromising the *privacy* of each. In other words, the space of the terrain enables a first actualization of the “tensions between hierarchy and autonomy, between collectivism and individualism,” so characteristic of configurations of houses. At the same time, the mere fact of living on the same terrain creates connections between families: when a problem occurs with the collective facilities, this involves all the families; the existence of shared areas, used for leisure and moving about, also stimulates these connections. Additionally, the internal space may be manipulated to ensure the *privacy* of each family: on Irene’s terrain, for instance, where each of the three sons has their own *house*, there is a stairway to the upper house, a stairway on the outside of the building, an internal door to the *house* of the son who lives in the *fundos* (the son even built a wall inside the terrain to separate his area) and another stairway, also to the rear, to the house of the third son. Irene’s *house* can be accessed via the kitchen door, to the rear, or via the living room door, at the *front*. Each house therefore has a separate entrance and none communicates directly with the other.

The *terrain* also materializes the hierarchical order prevailing in the family. While each house belongs to a different family, the terrain belongs to a single person, the owner (male or female) of the house, in most cases the father or mother of the children who built their own houses inside the terrain. As the first to build, the owner is also the one who lives in the front, while the oldest son traditionally lives on the floor above and the youngest to the rear. The *meia-água*, from this point of view, functions as an index of the hierarchy operating in the configuration of houses. Bernard's father, for example, built a *meia-água* at the back of the property when Bernard was constructing his *house* at the *front*... When the father died, the mother was left alone: Bernard's youngest son, already married but renting a place to live, decided to live with his grandmother. Today, the grandmother having since died, the *house* is still occupied by the youngest son. Here the *meia-água* materializes a non-egalitarian relationship: Bernard was the owner of the terrain, hence the person to make the *house* was Bernard while the *meia-água* belonged to his father in the rear of the property; the youngest son had nowhere else to live on the terrain, since the oldest son had built his house on the floor above – the *meia-água* expresses and annuls a relation of dependency. To paraphrase Woortmann, we could say that just as the *house* is the 'physical counterpart' of the *family*, so the *terrain* is the physical counterpart of the configuration of houses.

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