

“From the Hilltop to the Asphalt”:

Political materialities, middle-class subjectivities and public housing in Brazil

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Introduction

“I fear everything is going to fall down and we are all gonna die”, a restless voice pronounced, pointing to the humid wall in the back of a makeshift shack. In 2013, I met Dona Hilda, a ninety-four year old woman then residing on the top of a hill, in an impoverished area in the outskirts of Porto Alegre in southern Brazil. The path leading to her door was steep, and sometimes demanded going through alleyways and other properties. The uneven geography was topped with exposed bricks, pieces of what once was a house, weeds and abandoned toys. Embedded in the time of this precariousness, the peaceful yet resolute words of Dona Hilda, weaving together her history, were intercalated by the unfolding of life cycles she witnessed: being born, growing up, getting married, leaving home, having children, dying. In Dona Hilda’s narrative, the crumbling walls and bricks didn’t represent the end of her time in this world; they were the material evidence that she needed to leave, to move, to reinvent and pursue a future that insisted to lurk, in spite of her age.

Dona Hilda wasn’t going to have the same fate of the walls. Since 2009, she was being part of a local association in demand for housing units. Five years after, Dona Hilda got selected to become one of the recipients of public housing under the sponsorship of the federal government led by the leftist Workers’ Party (PT). The program, called *Minha Casa, Minha Vida*—“My House, My Life”—was designed in 2009, during the second term of President Lula. “In my life, I have wandered through all sorts of housing. Now I finally will

have a place where *to rest my bones* [largar os meus ossos]. From the hill I am going to the asphalt.”

As *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* unfolded, collective organizations started to gather in order to partake in the program’s outcomes, prefiguring new kinds of political activism and social engagement. By 2014, 100 million dollars had already been invested in the construction of some 2 million housing units throughout Brazil; another 1.5million contracts have already been signed between the country’s largest public bank and several private building companies. Dona Hilda is one of the most enthusiastic participants of the monthly meetings of Codespa—an important housing association that has its roots in Porto Alegre’s popular democratic participation in politics made famous by the city’s Participatory Budget. Various social organizations came together in Codespa, which has become the city’s main forum for debating and running public housing projects. Codespa’s leaders are involved in party politics and operate as bottom-up brokers of people’s relationships to the state, which proclaims itself popular, interventionist and way beyond neoliberalism.

Popular housing projects are key sites of governmentality. Rolnik (2013), when exploring the financialization of homeownership and housing rights in the United States, notes that “housing represented one of the most dynamic new frontiers of late neoliberalism during the decades of economic boom, and at the outset of the crisis was converted into one of the main Keynesian strategies to recover from it” (p. 1059). In developing countries, housing projects feed into a political economy blended by processes of commodification, financialization, social inclusion and narratives of national development through market expansion (Han, 2011). By means of the built environment they engender, these programs help to produce the architecture and the political materiality of the city, whereby certain ideas

about the state and its presence are enacted. To grasp the affective cartography of those spaces implies to unravel the entanglements of fraught policies, market configurations, state representations, local organizations, slices of territories within the urban tissue, non-human objects (like “the house” itself) and targeted subjectivities in the (re)making.

As technologies of intervention over populations, housing policies exert affection through the governance of the house and its people, congealed in a lively, political unit. In this paper, I explore the house as a key category through which low-income and first-time homeowners conceptualize their new lives, as they move from peri-urban illegal settlements to middle-class urban environments. Following Dona Hilda’s path, I delve into the ordinary to peruse the knowledge informing the inclusion and exclusion of people in the housing policy. In this sense, I argue, the house becomes an analytic window into broader issues of citizenship, social inclusion, and economic development.

Relying on a diffuse political machinery that reached hundreds of cities across the country, *Minha Casa Minha Vida* enabled local leaders, technicians and planners to decide upon the number of units and the allocation of this much desired housing benefit. In my ethnography, I flesh out how criteria for inclusion and exclusion in the policy are orchestrated as the consequence of daily interactions between stakeholders situated in distinct levels and scales of agency and power. In the process, I inquire the house as a moral stake that instantiates a desire for homeownership realized through the engagement in political activism. The yearning and concession of a house becomes therefore the concrete materiality whereby boundaries of citizenship are recreated to govern a new political and neoliberal subject. In contemporary Brazil, the construction of a democratic and modern society is crystalized in

housing policies aimed at rescuing people from abject poverty, thus weaving together citizenship and market inclusion.

Due to a combination of social policies, economic stability, minimal wage increase and expansion of internal markets, Brazil has seen the incorporation of some 40 million people – 53% of the population, whose total income ranges from 500 to 2,000 dollars per month – into what is now called the country’s “new middle class” (Neri, 2008; Pochman, 2012). Dona Hilda meets all the criteria for inclusion in the *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* policy: that is, women who are heads of households, the elderly and disabled, and people living in illegal squattings. Not surprising, she is constantly invited to public events and has become the poster person of the new kind of life made possible by the construction of large-scaled closed condominiums for those who were once poor and are now cast as Brazil’s new middle class. Yet, as Dona Hilda plans which goods she would move into her new home, which things she would have to buy, to whom she would leave her shack, and what her new life by the asphalt would look like, her narrative reflects the interactions she has with other beneficiaries, local leaders and state authorities, as she circulated through these distinct milieus. In what follows, I explore the moral economies and modes of subjectivation that crystalize in such exchanges between city planners, social collectives, and public housing beneficiaries.

Citizenship

Dona Hilda first came to Porto Alegre when she was eighteen years-old, escaping the limitations of a rural life and searching for employment and social mobility. During the second half of the 20th century, most Brazilian state capitals received a massive in-flow of

people in similar circumstances as they were rapidly converting into urbanized nodes of industrialization. As the downtown areas overpopulated, individuals relocated to peripheries and nearby municipalities, creating new neighborhoods. In the 1960s, during the beginnings of the country's military dictatorship, Porto Alegre's Municipal Housing Department led resettlement efforts for thousands of families. The most famous of those newly invented spaces was called *Restinga*, some 20km from the center of the city. Fifty years later, Restinga's overall infrastructure remains precarious, but it is still considered a hub for housing resettlements. There are five private condominiums of *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* there, if only because Restinga offers a wide array of inexpensive land and a labor force which considerably reduces the cost of each unit.

Dona Hilda and many others placed themselves in another region of the city called *Partenon*. Occupying a vast, rugged, and hilly area, *Partenon* developed largely outside of the city administration's radar, basically in line with the history of most of the country's favelas where first generation illegal occupants thrive and, after moving out, they rent their places to other people, eliciting a booming informal urban housing market. Throughout the years, Dona Hilda was constantly on the move, occupying various makeshift houses in the hilltops—either by informally renting the space or simply squatting in unfinished housing projects that had been forsaken by the municipality.

At the time I was introduced to Dona Hilda, *Codespa* was already enlisting some 600 families—a number that far exceeded the physical capability of the region's public housing programs. Since the first meetings, people were told that there would not be homes for all. This limited availability of units licensed local leaders to develop their own criteria to assess people's needs and merits and, based on this “moral hierarchy of worthiness,” to decide who

was deserving of public housing. We can think of this criteria and hierarchy in terms of Didier Fassin's concept of *biolegitimacy* (2009) which speaks to how governments rule by attaching unequal meanings to life in contexts of welfare and asylum adjudication. And following Adriana Petryna's concept of *biological citizenship* (2002) which reflected the selectivity of state protection for Chernobyl sufferers, we could argue that the concession of the *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* benefit depends on people's ability to constantly prove their precariousness. Under the claim of a new and social inclusive middle class, citizenship is being unequally distributed as political/economic/affective realities intertwine on the ground, rather eliciting a governance *through* difference (Povinelli, 2014) predicated on the universality of citizenship as a right.

In this political economy of the house, people have to constantly deploy their own voice in order to utter, to produce and to demonstrate their necessity for *struggling* and finally *winning* the much-desired homeownership. I heard many stories about visits organized by members of the housing association, weeks before elections took place in 2012. By the time, *Codespa's* leaders were invested in assessing people's needs to become beneficiaries, but those yearning for the benefit had to actively chase the commission and invite them in: "I want you to see *my* house, from the inside", was the most heard sentence. By proving there was a chasm between people's familial arrangements and the architectural models adopted by housing policies, such interventions enshrined the idea of a "low-income family", establishing the household as the site of an idealized figure of the family.

Dona Hilda was a skilled storyteller and that's how she successfully navigated this unequal micro-political terrain, which blended electoral politics, clientelism, corruption, and communal idealism, to realize her home ownership dream. She rapidly learned how to craft

stories that addressed a broader audience of public planners, governmental agents, local leaders and social scientists, including myself. She was able to experiment with her past to gather valuable pieces of her life and recount them through the prism of the housing projects she inhabited and became a representative of. In drawing on her own travails and her rise from abject poverty, she meets the expectations of politicians and marketers who are so deeply invested in affirming Brazil's middle-classness and political-economic projects.

As soon as I realized Dona Hilda's ability to deal with and assemble bare words into a politically and subjectively coherent narrative I started to look after further clues of her public appearances as a poster person of *Minha Casa Minha Vida* in Porto Alegre. In 2011, Dona Hilda was reported by the official newspaper of the city as an emblematic character in the *struggle* for housing. After introducing the infrastructural features of the new apartments, the report highlights Dona Hilda's words, pronounced during one of Codespa's meetings with municipal authorities: "I am already inscribed. I never won anything in my life. Now, I have *Bolsa Família* and I will win my little house", said dona Hilda de Lima Chaves, 90 years old, in the conclusion of her testimony full of hope, with applause that echoed all through the crowded hall of the church".¹

At moments, I found Dona Hilda's language to be profoundly rooted in sanitized figures of the poor, another byproduct of her long-lasting interaction with public policies. In her words: "I always worked hard. My day began at 5am, before sunrise. We did not have water, we did not have electricity, but still people told me: 'your children look like rich kids'. Why rich kids? You don't have to be wealthy to care!" However, as I heard Dona Hilda retell her story many times, it became clear that even though she thought of herself as poor, she was

¹ Available at: http://www2.portoalegre.rs.gov.br/op/default.php?p_noticia=142680

actively pursuing goals in life: sending the children to school, keeping everything clean and organized. Moreover, she saw the housing unit as a fair reward for her painstaking efforts to keep up against all odds.

Dona Hilda obviously believes she deserves to be one of the beneficiaries of public housing, but for reasons that far exceed the selective macro political interventions of the state. She is a ninety-three year old head of household who is responsible for a partially-disabled son and lives in an impoverished area deemed by the government as risky and improper for habitation. Most importantly, she paid the monthly rates of the association she is a part of, she attended every single meeting, she pleased the local leaders with gifts and tenderness, she yielded pictures and stories to the state, she volunteered herself as a character for the municipality's press release when the housing project was inaugurated, and she provided the anthropologist with coffee and warm words at her house. What else could one expect her laborious work for citizenship to engender?

Consumption

In their important works, Brian Owensby (1994) and Maureen O'Dougherty (2002) focused on the role the middle class played in the formation of a modern Brazilian identity, enacted by practices of consumption and manners that distinguish them from other (lower) classes. In my ethnographic forays into *Minha Casa, Minha Vida*, I have been charting how ideas of social inclusion, political subjectivity, consumption and quality of life are actually co-produced through the interactions of policy-makers, entrepreneurs, community representatives, and poor desiring citizens. As Clara Han (2011) puts it, consumption is not just a means towards social status and achievement; rather, it entails “gestures of care” and

the enactment of affective “relations in the hope of rendering something new in them” (p. 9). Following Navaro-Yashin (2012) and Daniel Miller (2001), I am interested in the built environment and in objects in themselves, both “as material properties with agencies of their own” (Navaro-Yashin, 2012:177) *and* as objects of a political induced affect.

In August 2014, I followed Dona Hilda to a local branch of one of Brazil’s biggest retail stores. Dona Hilda and her soon-to-be neighbors were expected to move in the following month, as the first units of the condominium were ready for occupation. Mr. Silva, the store manager, went to one of Codespa’s meetings to “introduce” the store and to say that he would open it for a full day, exclusively for the association’s members, so that they could pick out furniture for their new apartments.

Market inclusion and consumption are thoroughly embedded in *Minha Casa, Minha Vida*. Each one of the two million beneficiaries across the country is given a credit card, sponsored by the bank *Caixa Econômica Federal*, with a pre-approved credit limit of 2,000 dollars for the purchase of furniture and appliances. This initiative is purported to diminish the social and financial impacts of people’s moves into their new homes. Mr. Silva has seen several public housing customers come to his store in the last couple years. Drawing from these experiences, he understands that people need to learn how to make their own desires and expectations fit within their domestic budgets as well as the physical limits of their new units. In Mr. Silva’s reasoning, people were given the opportunity to rethink their ways of living through the housing policy.

By making a proper home, people would be further educated on how to live anew beyond poverty. Through those narrative practices, Ilmo operates as an organic designer of houses and subjects, therefore performing it—*housing* and *subjecting* the microcosms he

helps to construct. His work does not end with the selling of goods; rather, it extends to the very imagination of the household environment and the ways it is supposed to properly be peopled. In doing so, his role closely resembles that of a social worker, engaged in delivering “dignity and inclusion to the poor”. “I was touched since the first day I saw this people’s organization to thrive for a better future”, he told me. Yet, his reasoning is deeply rooted in economic language, for the building of a household will require people to continuously come back for new purchases and other credit concessions besides the housing program’s card.

Dona Hilda was the most excited consumer in the store. She circulated through every corridor, touching the goods, smiling and imagining what her new home would look like. She was searching for a basic stove and some essential bedroom and kitchen furniture. “I’m not a rich person, after all. If I were, I would consume regardless of price.” By resorting once again to entrenched notions of poverty and worthiness, Dona Hilda was somehow redrawing her relation to the housing policy and their planners, I thought, without renouncing the moral economy that converted her into a deserving beneficiary.

Dona Hilda’s journey through old and new milieus gives us a human sense of what leaks out of the official production of local middle-class worlds in this country yearning for deep infrastructural investments and closer attention to education, health and security as the street protests of the past year made clear. She carved a space in which her words and choices replicated some categories the state was using to frame her shifting consumer-citizenship, albeit without leaving politicians, marketers or local leaders fully comfortable in their assumptions and positions. It is in the midst of these zones where the moral, the political and the subjective meet that Dona Hilda is crafting a place for her desires, expectations and present-day becoming (Biehl, 2013).

ABSTRACT: Overseeing a rising economy, low unemployment, and multiple assistance programs, Brazil's federal government has promised an end to endemic poverty through the building of large-scale private condominiums. This paper draws from ethnographic research conducted in one such housing unit in the southern city of Porto Alegre, part of *Minha Casa Minha Vida* (My House, My Life), Brazil's largest public housing policy. In my ethnographic forays, the house has emerged as a key category through which low-income and first-time homeowners conceptualize their new lives, as they move from peri-urban illegal settlements to middle-class urban environments. Following Dona Hilda's travails for citizenship and narrative milieus, I delve into the ordinary to peruse how moral hierarchies of worthiness inform the inclusion and exclusion of people in the housing policy. In this sense, I argue, the house becomes an analytic window onto broader issues of citizenship, social inclusion, and economic development. How should a house - its persons, objects, and economy - be organized and governed? By questioning the house as a contested site for the replanning of life itself, I explore the materiality of objects and places as key to the instantiation of new political subjectivities.

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