

This visual essay dwells on the particular struggle for the historical city center of São Paulo enacted by contemporary urban occupation movements. The series of photographs, taken during multiple periods of ethnographic fieldwork (2014–2019), seeks to shed light on the notorious bodily encounter between thousands of homeless families engaged in urban movements on the one hand, and the vacated architecture of the city on the other hand. The aim is to interrogate how occupations are particular momentary spaces where the city is brought into motion by urban movements, prefiguring more just and sustainable ways of re-inhabiting, remaking, and rethinking the city.

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CENTRAL OCCUPATIONS: STILLS FROM A CITY IN MOVEMENT

Jeroen Stevens



Fig. 1
Guaianases Occupation, 2019. The remainders
of an old factory hall are prepared to serve for
shelter during a first occupation night.

Sem teto

Sem teto, literally “roof-less,” is an ambivalent Brazilian concept, identifying millions of citizens on the basis of their shared deprivation of a decent home. It encompasses numerous different populations, ranging from people left to dwell in areas of environmental and social risk, living in exploitative rent-based tenements, or plainly “sleeping rough” out on the street. With approximately a third of the metropolis’ population living in such inhumane conditions (Pinheiro, 2015), São Paulo is said to be one of the most divided cities worldwide (UN-Habitat, 2010). In the image above, “home” is nothing more than a carriage that provides minimal coverage during the night, while carrying the garbage collected from the city streets during the day. Here, home is an extension of the body, hauled around through a city that falls dauntingly short in providing basic human rights.



Fig. 2
"Attention: Don't throw packaging on the streets and on the sidewalks" (placard on waste picker carriage), downtown São Paulo, 2017.

Vacancy

Often abundantly marked with black *pixação* tags (see, e.g., Caldeira, 2012), vacant buildings comprise up to a third of the building stock in some of the central districts of São Paulo (Silva, 2009; Silva, Biava & Sígolo, 2009). Many of these buildings were once esteemed projects of architecture, their vacancy permeating the center of the city's built urban landscape with opportunities for both re-inhabitation and reformation. The central districts of São Paulo have for centuries been defined by urban investments. Iterative waves of development have continued to deposit the most prestigious architectural and urban projects of their times (Campos, 2002; Toledo, 1983, 1996). The city's historical core, despite concentrating the city's highest vacancy rates, could paradoxically still be considered the "heart" of the city (Tyrwhitt, Sert & Rogers, 1952) in manifold ways. For numerous disadvantaged *sem tetos* the central city is also "central" to their survival, as they frequently draw subsistence from the area's high concentration of public transport, crossing commuters, social services, and job opportunities. Hence, precisely where vacant architecture accrues most extensively, an enormous deficit in low income housing manifests. Vacancy—secured by fences, blockades, and surveillance technology—houses vectors and vermin precisely at the urban core where millions struggle to find basic shelter every day.



Fig. 3
Vacancy and *pixação* tags in downtown São Paulo, February 2015.

Movement

It is from this appalling paradox, characterizing the central city with a concurrent concentration of vacant architecture and homeless people, that central occupation movements began to emerge in the late 1990s. Since 1997, numerous occupations of abandoned buildings downtown have led to highly organized urban movements struggling to claim access to the opportunities embodied by the urban center. Such movements brought bodies and life-worlds into motion, carrying them away from the status quo in which they were hitherto deadlocked (Zibechi, 2012). In doing so, these urban movements inevitably began to move the city, changing spaces of negligence and real estate speculation into prototypes of an aspiring “other” city with improved rights and dwelling conditions. The twenty-four-floor Prestes Maia building, as one of the most striking examples, has been repeatedly occupied, housing more than six hundred families in the concrete relics of an old industrial skyscraper. Due to the edifice’s dysfunctional elevators, staircases and corridors rapidly transformed into a vertical circuitry of streets and alleys, providing the common space of a newly created, temporary community. Electricity wires are haphazardly tied against the walls, the windows by and large covered. Walls suffer from mold and deterioration. It is in the hereafter of former urban investments, and in the shadow of the center’s typical hustle and bustle, that occupants are transitorily residing: merely passing by to find refuge until further notice.



Fig. 4
Prestes Maia Occupation, staircase of the A Block, December 2015.

Occupation

Occupations enact the creative destruction of material borders that usually separate indigent homeless families from the spatial opportunities presented by vacant architecture. Occupations of misused properties constitute the foremost tactical instrument of housing movements in São Paulo, working to eke out dwelling spaces for the excluded urban masses. During the occupation of a building in the city's central Luz district in 2019, movement members sought to break through the reinforced gate of an old residential building, six floors high and desolate for at least two decades according to the homeless. The entire building was covered in black tags, with more windows broken than intact. Grabbing hands and a crowbar try to break through the threshold space that simultaneously connects and separates the inside from the outside. Vacant buildings and homeless bodies assemble in a direct and intricate conflation of human and non-human actors (Latour, 2005). The occupational act seeks to stake a claim over a formerly un(der)used, but still valuable space, addressing both the social function of property legally prescribed by the 2001 City Statute and the Brazilian constitutional and universal human right to dignified housing. The occupation reclaims buildings and peoples that others have forsaken. This insurgent constituent of urbanism (Holston, 2008) appears as an inevitable stepping stone in the struggle to effectuate legitimate and constitutional rights to decent housing. Occupations are transgressive indeed (Earle, 2017), but arise from the need to redress injustices entrenched in the city and its current socio-material form.



Fig. 5
Anhaya Occupation, May 2019.

Resistance

After the transgressive disruption of architectural borders, the very same material separation is re-established from the inside-out. Resistance follows occupation to defend a movement's claim over space. Former vacancy is instrumentalized to form a defensible stronghold, geared toward securing the newly conquered urban space that should eventually serve as housing. Resistance is fundamental, and its enactment entails a cathartic experience: "Rise up and claim your home!" exclaimed Carmen Silva, leader of the MSTC – Homeless Movement of the Center, during the April 2016 occupation night, when a dozen vacant buildings were simultaneously seized at midnight by multiple homeless movements engaged in the central city. The eight-floor building at the corner of José Bonifácio and Ouvidor Street was occupied by some hundred homeless. The former office building had neither electricity nor running water. In a violent confrontation, military police forces sought to block the entrance with tear-gas bombs but did not manage to stop the occupation. An elderly lady was taken away by an ambulance after being severely injured by rubber batons. Urban movements' pedagogy to politicize and "conscientize" (Freire, 1968) is first and foremost a pedagogy of confrontation (Barbosa, 2014), in which homeless poor are stimulated to take up battle against the oppressive forces that suppress them. Building occupations, then, become a tool for liberation, claiming the spatial foundations to start rebuilding life, community, and society in an autonomous manner.



Fig. 6
José Bonifacio Occupation, April 2016.

Mutirão

Mutirão, or “mutual aid,” is the principal modus operandi through which urban movements go about the transformation of abandoned spaces into occupied—and eventually inhabitable—dwelling environments. It is from this collective cleaning and repairing that a gradual process of settling radiates: a laborious choreography of people and architecture engaged in a collective *rite de passage* (Turner, 1974) of mutual purification. The struggle to turn former ruins into habitable communal dwellings is served and fortified by whatever means at hand. Although such communal practices of space-making may sound like a romantic endeavor, the on-the-ground drudgery involved is anything but amorous, often necessitating years of continuous improvement work without any guarantee of tenure-security whatsoever. This makes the *mutirão* a highly contradictory enterprise, since chances of staying depend on investments in home-making, but the permanent gain of these investments remains perpetually elusive as tenure will almost by definition be “lost” again sooner or later. Nonetheless, practices of mutual aid, which for a long time have provided a principal mode of peripheral city-making, are here transposed to the downtown urban core, testing alternative models of collaborative urban reform and refurbishment.



Fig. 7
Guaianases Occupation, April 2019: collective
cleaning of the floor with minimal means at hand.

Encampment

The center's vacant buildings are, however, not an architectural wasteland, but a rich repository of potentiality, presenting space that is readily up for grabs to serve new programmatic needs. In recognizing the spatial resources held in custody by sheer abandonment, occupation movements demonstrate in a double sense: as political demonstrations denouncing the malpractices of market-led urban (mis)management, and as pragmatic demonstrations, prefiguring potential solutions by setting out to re-inhabit the debris of rampant development-mania. To that end, vacant buildings provide an essential arsenal of resources. Occupations here never start from an architectural "blank slate." There is always *something* that is occupied. The 2016 José Bonifacio Occupation, for instance, demanded the mere act of settling in, installing oneself in the existing rudimentary and naked architectural structure. The agency of occupation movements thus largely depends also on the — often more obscured — agency of architectural artifacts that host them.



Fig. 8
José Bonifacio Occupation, April 2016.

Infill

If successful, the encampments installed by new occupations turn into genuine construction sites, where vacant structures frame the piecing together of new collective dwelling environments. Urban movements have developed remarkable expertise in self-construction ever since their emergence in the 1960s (see, e.g., Caminos, Turner & Steffian, 1969), but in contrast to the squatted peripheries, *autoconstrução* (self-construction) and *autogestão* (self-management) take radically different forms in the downtown city, as naked building frames—temporarily stripped of use and meaning—call for new appropriations and semiotic designations. “Objects act too!” so advocated Latour (2005) incessantly. “Architecture acts too!” so prove central occupation movements. The remarkable power of central occupations as prototypes of alternative forms of urbanism lies precisely within the meaningful symbiosis of strong social movements and significant architectural armatures. On the one hand, architecture demonstrates its capacity to outlive particular functionalist programs. When one regime of use fades-out, others can fade-in: a vast landscape of untapped possibilities. On the other hand, movements demonstrate how such re-engagement of vacant buildings is never a passive procedure, but instead, thoroughly depends on continuous labor investments and creative imagination. In occupations, the agency of urban movements and the agency of vacant architecture begin to converge and comingle. The Ocupação Direitos Humanos or “Human Rights Occupation,” north of São Paulo’s central area, is exemplary. Occupied in 2017, the concrete skeleton of a never-finished real estate project was piecemeal filled-up with hundreds of squatter-residences, creating an odd assembly of architectural and social potency.



Fig. 9
Direitos Humanos Occupation, May 2019.

Center

Not only does the center provide ample opportunities for life improvement, it also offers unparalleled exposure. Central occupations sit in the *middle* of things, which consequently gives them high strategic value in the political geography of the city. Given their prominent position along major downtown avenues, squares, and parks, urban movements can—quite literally—stop the regular functioning of the city in their pronouncement of political discontent. Their tactical positioning is capable of instantaneously moving the entire city. During the National Strike of April 2017, which fought against the impeachment of former left-wing president Dilma Rousseff, the entire city’s traffic system was brought to a standstill by carefully orchestrated collaborative blockades carried out by housing movements. As the developers’ saying goes, it’s all about “location, location, location,” but social movements, too, are well aware of the power of location. Place, then, is all but neutral, and the location of occupations within the architectural physiognomy of the city is crucial for the broader territorial tactics of urban movements. The urban movements involved in central squatting thus no longer merely claim a right to “the” city, but to the very *center* of the city.



Fig. 10
São João Avenue, April 2017: general strike.

Home

In the Martins Fontes Occupation, multiple homeless movements house together in a former six-floor office building. Right in front of the Anhangabau Metro, and in the midst of job-opportunities, social services, and cultural amenities, new chances for life improvement emerge from the reclamation and home-making of unused architecture. All and all, protest goes hand in hand with proposal. While politically ‘protesting’ for central housing, occupations simultaneously set out to pragmatically ‘propose’ how to go about this by initiating the self-construction of this goal. The resulting homes are half home-made, half pre-made, partially self-built, and partially preconceived by already existent architecture. Although they remain predominantly temporary inhabitations, central occupations provide a structural leverage for thousands of *sem teto* families. Are they not, then, in recycling existing central structures, the prototypes of more sustainable and inclusive urban development paths? In any case, the remarkable potentiality of vacant architecture becomes highly palpable through the struggle of urban movements embodied by these central occupations. As a consequence, urban movement struggles often associated with the urban periphery or “margins” of the city, here forcefully claim central stage.



Fig. 11
Martins Fontes Occupation, May 2018.

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