

Access to Housing versus Access to the City

Júnia Santa Rosa in conversation with Rainer Hehl and Nanda Eskes on June 20, 2013, at the “Minha Casa—Nossa Cidade” roundtable at Studio X, Rio de Janeiro. Santa Rosa is director of the Institutional Development Department at the Secretariat for the Ministry of Housing. She is an economist by profession and holds a master’s degree in urban management.

While protesters are filling the streets of Rio de Janeiro, culminating in the largest demonstration that the country has ever seen, Júnia Santa Rosa talks about how the economic logic of the “Minha Casa, Minha Vida” housing program could be summed up in the logic of improving urban quality through public and academic participation.

Q: The MCMV program has provided low-cost housing that is unprecedented in dimension, successfully stimulating the economy through the participation of large-scale construction companies. But there is a question mark over the quality of houses and the access to the city provided by MCMV, as the developments are monofunctional and very often in locations remote from urban centers. Shouldn’t we think more about access to the city instead of just addressing access to housing? What is the Ministry of Housing doing to improve the program in this sense? How can we rethink Brazilian cities through the implementation of the MCMV program at a moment when people in the streets are calling for change?

A: First of all, I would like to mention that the ministry is very grateful for your input and for the interest in this project, which provides an opportunity to discuss the work of architects and urban designers in the MCMV program. Although we have promoted many events to discuss urban and design issues, we have not managed to engage universities as much as we had wished. The scope of engagement with other groups and civil movements that can help to bring the housing question forward should also be increased. Currently it’s rare to find initiatives like Instituto CASA, which involves rethink-

ing the role of affordable housing within the city. For us at the National Housing Secretariat of the Ministry of Cities, the program is quite ambitious. In 2008, one year before the launch of the program, both market and government resources were plentiful, which enabled a favorable juncture for investment in affordable housing. We had signals that the civil construction market was heated up and that it was launching IPOs (Initial Public Offerings) in the stock market. On the government’s side, the launch of the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC) in 2007 demonstrated commitment to investment in social and urban infrastructure. In this context of bulky investments, project and design quality rapidly became an issue, first focused on favelas through the PAC program and later on MCMV.¹

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The amount of subsidies channeled to MCMV is intended to make affordable housing attractive for the private sector. This is often questioned, but it is an important political decision that has made it possible to provide large-scale housing for the lower income groups. This scale of achievement was unusual in Brazil, except during the period in which the National Housing Bank (BNH) was

active, the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. Nevertheless, BNH did not manage to reach low-income families. The political emphasis on scale and low-income groups meant that design-quality issues were sidelined. Once the first MCMV housing developments began, it became clear which challenges still needed to be faced.

Today we have noticed that a lot of what has been criticized about the program is the scale of its operation and the typologies of housing units. At the Ministry of Housing, we have regular brainstorming sessions in the form of meetings and workshops with national and international experts, where we try to define criteria, guidelines, and norms to improve the program. The challenge is to deliver housing to households with no access to credit or housing design. Within a public program, resources can be used in more productive ways. However, there is a limit to the spectrum of typologies that can be profitably implemented due to the industrialization involved in the construction process.

Another major question we need to answer concerns the standards we have for our cities. The city portrayed in pictures is often perceived as being above achievable standards. It is problematic for us to try to adopt the standards of Western democratic cities, or those of the cities of the Global South, for our cities.² The majority of the world’s youth is concentrated in the Global South; what are the standards for cities that we should envisage for them? This is a discussion that we are having with our African and Indian counterparts within the IBSA Working Group on Human Settlements.

It’s not enough to just provide housing to our citizens; housing is a basic right enshrined in our constitution anyway. We think that the program should include daycare centers, sewage facilities, an electric grid, and other infrastructure that will enrich the quality of housing. The outskirts of cities often lack these qualities, with people scrambling for basic facilities like running water, a continuous electric supply, and reliable public transport. We need to define the culturally determinant factors and have discussions about these topics.

As public officials in a management position, we aim to seek higher standards in the second phase of the MCMV program than those achieved in the first phase. We believe that more surveys and evaluations are necessary to bring about debate and raise important issues. It is important to build proficiency in our schools for reviewing the role of the

architect at this moment of high bets on affordable housing. We need to update models to achieve more sustainable standards. We are working to rectify the lack of engagement with universities by stirring up academic debate. What kinds of standards for housing development can we achieve? How can these help revive cities?

“It seems that the question of standards often prevents good building quality rather than securing it.”

Q: We are confronted with the problem that the new developments segregate and divide along income brackets. How can we deal with wage discrimination and involve the perspective of the beneficiaries in the implementation of the program? Is there a consensus that a programmatic mix and diversity of uses are necessary and important to uphold?

A: -Once you have handed out a small area of four hundred units, you are placing together about two thousand people in a post-occupation phase. There are people from the north, south, east, and west coming to live together, bringing traditions from their regions, and this gives rise to a whole dynamic that was not present before. To make sure they will live and coexist peacefully, the transition has to be made very carefully.

Bureaucracy cannot intervene in this interaction and social demands must be dealt with very carefully; it's a double challenge given the schedule of implementing things. The reality in a favela is very different, as the learning process there is slower. We have attempted many projects in the favelas together with private entrepreneurs and architects, and the most important lesson we've learned is that a managerial model can help us in the design of a new public policy for the MCMV program.

Mixing income brackets is an advantageous business for huge companies and it is something they aspire toward to achieve a critical scale in construction. The post-occupation phase is a thorny issue, however, because families from a high income bracket don't want to live side by side those with low incomes. This is the well-known NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) phenomenon. Many of our relatives love to live in places like Alphaville,³ which is a middle-class utopia of sorts.

There are different low-income brackets living in condominium units like these, which are divided and differentiated. How can you mix these people together? We still need to work on effective ways to make this feasible.

The MCMV program is not against mixed use, but it doesn't offer financing schemes for entrepreneurs at the moment. This will be very difficult, however, considering the fact that everything crops up at the same time in programs like these. Secondly, we also maintain that commercial activities and living areas should stay separate because most people aspire to live in a silent area away from noisy bus stops and metros. We are trying to come up with incentives, emulating the Brasilia model, with every block having its own commerce. Residents just want a home and a square for their kids to play in. This is a discussion that needs to be had by the whole society; architecture offices talk frequently about mixing. The design of low-cost housing units is a conundrum, however, as the beneficiary aspires to benchmark values for their house—an alarm system in the house and a backyard with a barbecue.

Q: It seems that the question of standards often prevents good building quality rather than securing it. If the maximum size for social housing is just fifty square meters, some families won't have enough space. While the standard limits the possibilities for reduced models, is there no concern about adaptability and future expansions? Why don't we explore the potential of people improving their houses by allowing more participation?

“The question that arises is whether we should build forty-square-meter houses or rather twenty-square-meter ones and let the occupant complete the rest.”

A: We can't bring this process to a close without involving urban planners and architects in the program. We have components of civil construction in terms of building materials present in the program, but the topic of design quality and the discussion about aesthetics are missing. Unlike in previous times, we currently have so many resources available for innovation from our innovation support agency, FINEP, and we are keen

on involving university research groups to work in this direction.

Another important topic is that of typology reform for MCMV. The question that arises is whether we should build forty-square-meter houses or rather twenty-square-meter ones and let the occupant complete the rest. I am aware here of the reference to the ELEMENTAL project in Chile.⁴ But the situation in Chile is very different from Brazil. In the past, we had a popular model in Brazil called the “embryo house,”⁵ but given our experience from previous projects, we feel that the idea needs rethinking within the new Brazilian context. There is also a refurbished reform modality in MCMV, but it still needs to be made operational. For this, we are asking for input from the university, architects, and other stakeholders. The government is open to suggestions.

“Attempting to improve MCMV without changing social segregation and urban land management in Brazil is like a dog chasing its own tail.”

Q: But it also turns out that the scale of the developments involving big construction firms leads to a lack of variety and an absence of innovative solutions. Why don't we use small entrepreneurs, instead of large contractors, to achieve a greater mix, and why don't we build in areas where services already exist?

A: MCMV initially attracted the interest of large companies, but now we are mostly talking about medium-size entrepreneurs. Labor has become a major bottleneck in our operation; back in 2009, the situation was better. The current one is very different and we have major competition from ports and Olympics sites. The market has become extremely competitive, with the major construction companies preferring to build Olympics sites and infrastructure projects like dams. However, we are seeing a new group of middle-class contractors emerging for the second phase of MCMV and onward.

I understand the sense of the second question. When we look for large spaces for urban expansion, we have to also keep in mind the cost and difficulty involved in creating infrastructure. So why not connect the program with existing infrastructure? However, it is not

programs like MCMV that have created new urban expansion zones like the West Zone of Rio, places like Santa Cruz and Campo Grande. People living in high-income areas don't want to see blue-collar workers living in the same area as them. This forces the workers to relocate to the outskirts. Urban planning in Brazil has not been able to secure well-located urban land for the poor. If we don't address the issues related to land management—which are obviously also related to the problem of class and spatial segregation—in a wider discussion that involves the society as a whole, we won't be able to change the way the program is implemented. Attempting to improve MCMV without changing social segregation and urban land management in Brazil is like a dog chasing its own tail.

– Edited by Nitin Bathla

1. PAC was initiated by the federal government of Brazil in order to launch large-scale infrastructure projects, in some cases also related to the production of housing and to upgrading measures in the favelas.

2. The nations of Africa, Central and Latin America, and most of Asia are collectively known as the Global South.

3. Alphaville is the name of a commercial real-estate and gated-communities development in Brazil and Portugal, but also refers to the largest gated condominium complex in the world, which is located in São Paulo and contains a gated complex of offices, shopping centers, and housing for two hundred thousand people.

4. ELEMENTAL is a Chilean architecture firm founded by Alejandro Aravena. The office elaborates on low-cost housing projects, which are considered avant-garde, based on how informality could be accommodated within a formal setup.

5. The embryo house is a basic housing unit consisting of a living space, toilet, and kitchen. The house allows for the occupants to add and expand over time.