

## Progress or "Déjà Vu"?

### Mass Housing in Brazil Under the Influence of Transnational Politics

The 1960s in Brazil saw housing policy and design leave national and domestic discourse to enter a transnational orbit. The decade saw the emergence of new forms of imported planning and architectural language completely different than in previous years. This was accompanied by a political shift away from the left and towards a military dictatorship. Conscious or not, mass housing programs like MCMV are still in line with the heritage of the US-American model of suburban commuter towns.

The Cold War polarization ushered in a race for political alliances in the "Third World." Latin America was soon becoming the hotbed for Cold War politics and antics. With populist regimes taking power, there was an ebullition of leftist ideology in Latin American nations. The leftist social consolidation in the Latin American states led to a phobia over the spread of anti-US-American sentiments. This deeply affected US foreign policy towards Latin America, especially considering its proximity to the US.<sup>1</sup> With its vision to counter the rise of "the left" in Latin America and install a mass consumerist base there, President Kennedy's administration promoted policies of extraordinary intervention. One such program that was to define the decade, and underline the ones ahead of it, was the "Alliance for Progress." The program was meant to be a "force majeure" to alleviate underdevelopment and poverty in Latin America and introduce a new direction in the post-war modernity of the continent. The ten-year cooperation program aimed at providing technical and economic assistance through loans and the exchange of technical expertise. When the left-leaning Joao Goulart took over the president's office in Brazil in 1960, the program began to increasingly focus on defeating leftist sentiment in Brazil. The aim was to reinstate and reinforce right-wing politics in the country through developmental

tactics, creating a vast "proletariat" that would become passive consumers.

Leandro Benmergui,<sup>2</sup> in his analysis of Alliance housing policies in Rio de Janeiro, points to how "home ownership" was promoted as an outgrowth of basic capitalism. He writes "It was believed that by adopting proprietorship, a rejection of communist ideals of state ownership could be brought about." Housing was thus cited as an important

The consequential involvement of foreign capital in the form of aid, assistance and investment made housing less of a social issue and more of a source of capital creation. The house was also exploited as a disguised entry point for a foreign culture industry to establish itself. William Rowe, in his book *Memory and Modernity*,<sup>3</sup> points to the social transformations of *deterritorialization* (a release of cultural signs



Rio de Janeiro Governor Carlos Lacerda in talks with US President John F. Kennedy

field for technical assistance and engagement. There was, however, politics at play over the territorial placement of the housing programs in Brazil. The focus was on Rio de Janeiro, where the program was used as a springboard to launch Carlos Lacerda, a pro-American Rio governor. Thus, about 9,000 popular housing units were constructed, spread around the periphery of Rio in communities named Vila Kennedy, Vila Esperanca, and Cidade de Deus. The housing communities were often established around industrial units in remote areas outside the city boundaries with little or no public transport connection to the city centre.

from a fixed place and time) and *hybridization* (the separation of new forms from existing practices, which recombine with new forms and practices) that were at play in establishing a culture industry at this point in Latin American society. The Alliance housing program used the same tactics, whereby deterritorialized housing and planning models were used to build urban housing with very little or almost no concern for the local climatic and social specificities. The rationalized construction of affordable single-family homes resulted in spatial design that emphasized long street corridors with long rows of houses, creating a sense

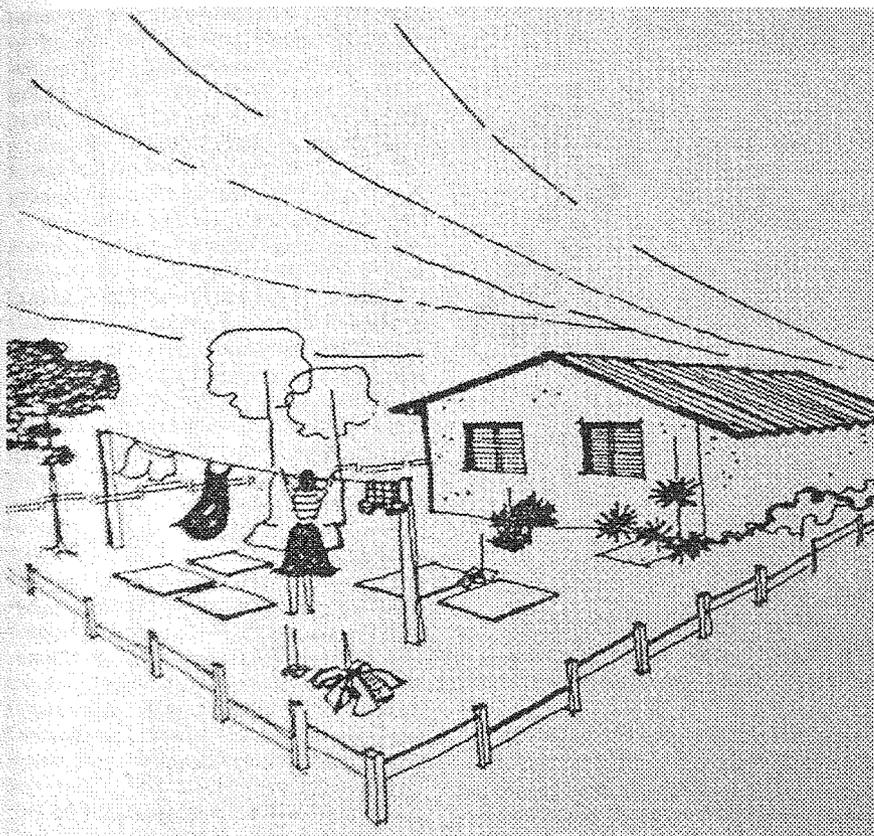
of repetition. It's interesting to note the use of the "embryo-house" plan (a single room, kitchen, and bathroom) here. By using this typology, which provided only the minimum amenities to the homeowner, the house could be made affordable. The flexibility would allow him to add to the house whenever he was able to afford an expansion. By creating this legitimate ownership, the payment for urban land and public

cultivating its people to be more rational and less emotional. It was thought that the houses would take different shape and color in time, reflecting the personality of every individual family or homeowner. Written media was cleverly utilized along with the housing program to instill a need for change in the new citizens. The publication of the *Manual of the Homeowner* for the residents of Villa Kennedy stands out as one such

out trash, and registering children at the local school. The man, meanwhile, was shown as a bread winner, paying monthly installments for the house to the municipality.

The Alliance of Progress program died a slow death when Brazil withdrew from this folly by the end of the 1960s, realizing that the program was a trap in disguise of aid. The Alliance housing programs were a social failure owing not only to the homogeneity of the function of housing and the lack of diversity, but also to the lack of response to housing's social, cultural, and climatic specificity. Although the hybridization of the houses was able to create popular neighborhoods like Cidade de Deus, it was unable to solve issues of social segregation in society. The current state of affairs in Brazil's social housing is a déjà vu of sorts, with the introduction of programs like "Minha Casa, Minha Vida," which are also based on rationalized construction real estate logic. These programs have learned little from the follies of the past and are heading towards the same dead end as the "Alliance for Progress" developments. As we still see the same kind of models repeated endlessly throughout the country, the lesson from history should urge us to think about updated solutions for social housing that meet the necessities and specific conditions that popular Brazilian culture is calling for today.

– Nitin Bathla



Excerpt from the homeowner's manual for the residents of Villa Kennedy

services could be accounted for. The slums were further stigmatized as sites of marginality and squalor, and massive initiatives were undertaken to demolish them, relocating the slum dwellers into mass housing complexes. A parallel can be made here to social experiments that the United States attempted through social relocation projects like Pruitt-Igoe, both in the execution and failure of these projects. It was thought that the provision of housing would modernize, democratize, and socially integrate the urban dweller. The attempt was to promote and incorporate the habits of mass consumption associated with a middle class society by

example. The manual provides the homeowners with guidelines on how they should enlarge, embellish, and maintain their houses, and what they should do to ensure the legality of their ownership. It was believed that promoting hybridization among the homeowners would legitimize this alien style in the country. Mattelart and Dorfman, in their popular analysis of media techniques in Latin America "How to Read Donald Duck," point out how imagery was used as a tool of massification to propagate cultural messages. The manual featured stereotypical gender roles, such as a white woman hanging out the laundry in the backyard, throwing

1. Popular mass media caricatures depict the phobia of these times, especially from famous cartoonist like Bill Mauldin, one of whose cartoons depicts the Latin American states as a group of exploding hats, with Cuba and Panama already falling to communism. The caption reads "Brazil about to explode."

2. Benmergui Leandro, "The Alliance for Progress and Housing Policy in Rio de Janeiro & Buenos Aires in the 1960s," *Urban History* 36 (2009).

3. William Rowe, *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America* (New York: Verso, 1991).