

Mobilizing social housing for urban revalorization: reflections on Rio de Janeiro's downtown area

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The presentation aims to discuss how social housing is being considered as an instrument for urban revalorization of Rio de Janeiro's downtown districts. I understand urban revalorization as a process that combines a set of measures implemented by state actors – generally in partnership with private sector and “quangos” – to encourage real estate market activity of delimited urban spaces that experienced a decline in land values. These measures may include changes in land use legislation, remaking of built environment, construction or renovation of infrastructures, subsidies for investors, symbolic re-signification through marketing strategies and so on.

Like in many other Brazilian metropolises during the second half of the 20th century, the districts in downtown Rio de Janeiro faced expressive processes of depopulation, degradation of the built environment and impoverishment of local inhabitants. In the last two decades national and local authorities launched a plethora of “revitalization” plans, programs and target interventions – generally inspired by international “successful cases” – in quest to promote the interest of private investors in those districts. Meanwhile, it was observed an intensification of “right to the city” social movements struggling for a more inclusive agenda in state interventions for the downtown area. If, historically, social struggles for affordable housing were concentrated in the fringes of Rio de Janeiro metropolis, latterly downtown districts have been accommodating a significant portion of those movements.

It could be argued that those distinct proposes for downtown Rio de Janeiro – one aligned with exchange value of urban land and the other encompassing its use value – would found a compromise through the allocation of public investments in social housing projects for the area. Besides attending the demands of social movements, affordable housing would function as an amend to evictions of low income

residents affected by the rise in rents and others affected by expropriations engendered in the remaking of the built environment. Since the mid-1990s, state actors have been combining efforts to the promotion of social housing in downtown Rio de Janeiro. It's a symbolic gesture considering that the Brazilian housing policies have historically privileged the establishment of the poor in peripheral urban areas. In the last two decades, around 200 housing units were created with the construction of new buildings in vacant lots and also through the rehabilitation of tenements and squatter settlements. Although its insignificant achievement in terms of numbers – considering the enormous housing deficit in Rio de Janeiro metropolis – recent announcements of the construction of thousands of housing units in downtown districts and the elaboration of a social housing plan for the area suggests the recommitment of state actors on attempting new forms of urban development, even if the peripheral pattern is still prevalent.

Through this presentation, we propose a critical reflection on the state engagement in promoting social housing in Rio de Janeiro downtown districts. The research – based on interviews with residents, state representatives and real estate entrepreneurs, documents review and fieldwork – reveals that social housing has been mobilized as an instrument for the urban revalorization process and that the “right to the city” claims from the social movements are not represented in integrity. In the words of state actors, the construction of social housing units and the rehabilitation of squatter settlements are conceived as experiences that would serve businessmen and real estate entrepreneurs to reinvest in the area as those new social housing developments would function as “bright spots”, which would catalyze positive effects for the regeneration of urban fabric. Adding to this, eviction of squatters occupying buildings selected for rehabilitation showed state agents disengaging from Brazilian law concerning housing rights. Violent actions and the use of illegal strategies to pressure the departure of families, combined with the negligible values of eviction indemnities, illustrate part of the state's *modus operandi*.

It is observed that, as a general rule, downtown Rio de Janeiro “revitalization” investments intensify elitist and exclusionary traits of Brazilian urban policy, making the permanence of the poor irreconcilable with land revalorization – which becomes

the mainly objective driving these urban interventions. State action in promoting social housing developments in downtown districts is deliberately not engaged with the current demand for housing from local low income families. The projects are not conceived to meet these people's needs and they don't respect the basic principles of housing rights set by Brazilian legislation. In Rio de Janeiro downtown area case, principles of urban policy that would supposedly compose a redistributive agenda of urban development – repopulation of downtown districts and promotion of social housing – end up being captured by the business-driven logic of space production.