



MIDDLE CLASS SENSORIAL AND BOTTOM-UP CONDOMINIZATION IN BRAZIL'S POST-NEOLIBERAL PUBLIC HOUSING¹

Sensorio de Clase Media y Condominización de Abajo Hacia Arriba en el Programa de Vivienda Pública Posneoliberal de Brasil

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Keywords

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ABSTRACT: In Brazil's highly segregated urban centers, geographic location is known for its power to instantiate class positionality. Drawing on long-term ethnographic engagements with housing beneficiaries of Brazil's now revamped *Minha Casa Minha Vida*, I argue that, in the aftermath of the move, first-time homeowners activate remembrances of the hills (the slums where they lived before) to craft novel classed geographies which defy clearcut isomorphisms of class and space. As the once-rising-poor transitioned from peri-urban informal settlements to middle-class urban environments, the material and sensuous qualities of the hills leaked onto the built environment of the projects in unexpected ways. Yet first-time homeowners also engage in new infrastructural practices that challenge fixed understandings of class subjectivity and distinction—a middle-class-making process I refer to as “bottom-up condominiumization”—. By foregrounding the sensuous and material aspects of socioeconomic membership in the ruins of post-neoliberalism, I attend to the instability and unruliness of middle-class formations. Rather than an objective identifier for social stratification, the post-neoliberal middle class is best defined through its spectral and fleeting qualities—that is, as a “middle class sensorial”—.

Palabras clave

Clase media
Condominización
Posneoliberalismo
Brasil

RESUMEN: En los centros urbanos altamente segregados de Brasil, la ubicación geográfica es conocida por su poder de ejemplificar la posición de clase. Basándome en compromisos etnográficos a largo plazo con beneficiarios de viviendas de la ahora renovada *Minha Casa Minha Vida* de Brasil, sostengo que, después de la mudanza, los propietarios activan los recuerdos de las colinas para crear nuevas geografías que desafían los isomorfismos bien definidos de clase y espacio. A medida que los pobres en ascenso pasaron de los asentamientos informales periurbanos a los entornos urbanos de clase media, las cualidades materiales y sensoriales de las colinas se filtraron en el entorno de los proyectos construidos de formas inesperadas. Sin embargo, los propietarios también se involucran en nuevas prácticas de infraestructura que desafían las comprensiones fijas de la subjetividad y la distinción de clase, un proceso de creación de clase media al que me refiero como «condominización de abajo hacia arriba». Al poner en primer plano los aspectos materiales y sensoriales de la ciudadanía socioeconómica en el contexto de ruinas del posneoliberalismo, presto atención a la inestabilidad y la ambivalencia de las formaciones de clase media. En lugar de un identificador objetivo para la estratificación social, la clase media posneoliberal se define mejor a través de sus cualidades espectrales y fugaces, es decir, como un «sensorio de clase media».

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“Dona Hilda, would you like to visit the neighborhood where you lived for the past 30 years?” I asked one of my informants in a conversation back in 2017.

The ninety-eight-year-old African-Brazilian woman shifted on her chair and hesitated for a moment. Three years earlier, she had moved from an unfinished and squatted shack in one of Porto Alegre’s informal hilltops to a fully-equipped apartment in a middle-class residential area constructed with funds from Brazil’s largest-ever public housing program, the *Minha Casa Minha Vida*. After years of mobilizing with Codespa, a neighborhood association, to demand affordable housing, she was chosen to become a beneficiary in 2014. Dona Hilda soon turned into the poster person for a new kind of life made possible through Brazil’s unique post-neoliberal combination of public intervention, grassroots politics, and personal longing.

“I don’t think so”, she retorted to my question as she looked through the window crevices. She giggled as she told me the story of how her former neighbors doubted that Beto (her partially debilitated son) and her had moved to *Residencial Bento Gonçalves*. Only when they saw the suitcases and the moving truck loaded with a fridge, a washing machine, two mattresses, and other small personal items did they believe that Dona Hilda—who had wandered through all sorts of houses in her life— would finally descend from the hills onto the asphalt.

*I am fine here.
I don't want anything else.
This is all good.
If one is happy, it doesn't matter what one has.
To eat well,
to drink well,
to sleep well,
it's all that matters.*

Dona Hilda’s refusal to embark on a journey to meet past acquaintances caught me by surprise. She had never struck me as particularly concerned about distinguishing herself from the friends and neighbors with whom she interacted. In our prior conversations, she spoke freely about the times when they knocked on her door to check if she had *actually* moved to the projects. “The whole hill came down”, Beto told me. “They came looking for us and then laughed”. Dona Hilda shook her head and chuckled, adding that “people did not believe. I didn’t even believe it myself!”. As time passed, and I kept returning to meet with Dona Hilda in her new apartment, I realized the hills had become a past and distant remembrance—less an embodied reality and more a spectral presence—. And yet, there was something more in Dona Hilda’s desire not to return than the simple need for social distinction. The hills, transfigured into the new architecture of the apartment, unlocked new experiences of comfort, privacy, and autonomy that not only reveal the formation of new classed subjectivities but also push us to develop more nuanced understandings of class in the social sciences.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Brazil’s highly segregated urban centers, tropes of geographic location are known for their indexical power to instantiate class positionality. Urban expansion processes have

traditionally followed a logic of spatial and classed segregation in which low-income families settled in vast, self-constructed peripheral settlements with irregular legal status, scant public services, and precarious infrastructure (Caldeira, 2017). By contrast, upper-middle classes have established themselves through the creation of “fortified enclaves” that have steadfastly sprawled over the 1980s and 1990s in the wake of the country’s re-democratization and neoliberal policies, which paved the way for privatized, self-contained, inter-connected, and securitized peri-urban spaces (Caldeira, 2000).

Such an uneven and antithetical form of producing the city has been accompanied by an equally asymmetric class language that opposes the poor to the well-off elites while also seeking to promote an “equilibrium of antagonisms” (Freyre, 1986). Pacts of societal conciliation across the stratification system have been a common strategy to bolster national integration at critical political-economic junctures (Mitchell, 2017). Throughout the twentieth century, the poor developed into a volatile and flexible constituency in whose name bills were passed and governmental coalitions were built. Through the enactment of national identities based on the ideology of the *mestiçagem*, the poor were engaged as an abstract number and a governable social body by politicians and policymakers seeking to ward off major political and fiscal reforms. As anthropologist Renato Ortiz (1994) wrote in the context of the Vargas years and the quest for a “racial democracy” (the principle that Africans, Europeans, and Indigenous populations could not only coexist but should also merge to produce a national *mestizo* character) the “myth of the three races becomes plausible and is actualized as a ritual. The ideology of the *mestiçagem* is recast and diffused as common sense, ritually celebrated in daily relationships and large events, including the carnival and soccer. *Mestizo* thus embraces the new national” (p. 41).

Recent changes in Brazil’s political economy complicate these intractable dichotomies of space, race, and class. Between 2003 and 2014, a range of successfully implemented social and economic policies—including monetary stability, controlled inflation, low unemployment, credit expansion, minimum wage increases, and conditional cash transfers—redistributed wealth and reduced the Gini coefficient—the world’s most accepted measure for inequality—to levels only seen during the “Economic Miracle” of the 1970s, when Brazil also grew significantly, albeit without generating income redistribution. The socioeconomic transformations of this period were ferociously debated, in Brazil and the world, among public intellectuals, policymakers, journalists, politicians, and marketers (Kopper and Damo, 2018). Most notably, in 2008, world-class economist Marcelo Neri (2011) performed a series of statistical and income-based calculations that would lead to his famous intervention that Brazil had finally become a “middle-class country”—a shimmering catchphrase embraced by Dilma Rousseff’s cabinet to proclaim the end of endemic poverty as swiftly as Neri himself was made a leading intellectual figure within the federal government (Kopper, 2020)—. Dozens of millions of individuals like Dona Hilda—previously warded off from markets and government programs—found a way to not only profit from the consumer-targeting policies of the Workers’ Party’s era (2003–2016), but to also benefit from public debates that hailed the emergence of a “new middle class”, Neri’s renowned “Classe C”.

In such a context, it could be argued that the new middle class as a category of national conciliation came to occupy a similar position to that of the converging figure of the *mestizo* in the 1930s. However, this process took place alongside the emergence of new forms of politicizing, mobilizing, and staking ethno-racial claims of access to land and education on the

state (Mitchell, 2017; Penha-Lopes, 2017). Class and race became poignant categories around which the sociohistorical and discursive experience of “belonging to the middle” coalesced and was construed (Coutinho, 2018). And as we shall see, political and economic processes produced far more durable subjective and affective consequences than the periods of crisis that scorch the economies of developing countries after cycles of rapid growth, as has been the case in Brazil since 2015.

The discursive emphasis on languages that foreground the “middle” of the social stratification came alongside important changes in Brazil’s urban peripheries and space more broadly (Richmond *et al.*, 2020). While patterns of socioeconomic and racial segregation still hold for many Brazilian cities, gated communities and their associated infrastructures have become objects of aspiration in lower-income peripheries in recent years. Credit availability and governmental tax cuts on durable goods made it possible for “new middle class” households to incrementally refurbish and verticalize their homes (Cavalcanti, 2009), while public housing began adopting barbed-wired fences and other surveillance technologies to address growing security concerns (Kopper, 2018) —radically altering the built environments and social geographies of these spaces—. Finally, new exclusionary patterns have been crystallizing as “hyper-peripheries” (Torres and Marques, 2001; Kopper, 2021) rub shoulders with ever more predatory processes of gentrification and urban expropriation (Bittencourt, Giannotti and Marques, 2021).

In this article, I discuss how “the middle” emerges as an encompassing if elusive category of identification as public housing beneficiaries move away from informal settlements to become urban, middle-class homeowners. It draws on long-term ethnographic engagements with housing beneficiaries of Brazil’s now revamped *Minha Casa Minha Vida* (MCMV) in the city of Porto Alegre —the relatively well-off yet highly segregated capital city of the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul—. I argue that, in the aftermath of the move, first-time homeowners activate remembrances of the hills to craft new geographies which defy clearcut isomorphisms of class and space. They also engage in new infrastructural practices that challenge fixed understandings of class subjectivity and distinction —a middle-class-making process I refer to as “bottom-up condominiumization”—.

Throughout the article, both the hills and the condominium work as figures of thought that get us closer to a sensuous and material understanding of middle-class formations in post-neoliberal Latin America. Without disregarding the conventional contributions from the literature —which have alternatively emphasized the historical, economic, social, and political aspects of belonging to the middle class— here I am interested in foregrounding the instability and unruliness of middle-class formations. Whereas countries like Argentina and Chile have long enshrined the notion of the middle class as integral to identity politics and nation-making (Adamovsky, Visacovsky and Vargas, 2014), Brazil only recently began thinking of its national futurity through the idea of a middle-class (Kopper, 2022). Likewise, it was only via recent structural socioeconomic transformations and discursive incitements that the poor began to actively perceive themselves as moving toward the “middle” of the social stratification (Costa, 2022). Thus, rather than preemptively imposing an objective identifier for social stratification, in this article I argue that the post-neoliberal middle class is best defined through its spectral and fleeting qualities —that is, as a “middle class sensorial”—. Such an open approach allows us to better grasp the hesitations, complexities, and contradictions inherent to class mobility as a social, material, and subjective process in time and space; the ways in which people move in and out of broader discursive frames

and patterns of classification; and the affective and ephemeral qualities of people's experimentations with social distinction and inclusion, and past and future tropes of meaning.

The article first makes a case for the anthropological study of subjective and affective formations in post-neoliberal political-economic configurations. Part two, middle-class sensorial, lays the theoretical foundations of this concept by drawing on the interjacent spatial and temporal history of class, hope, and upward social mobility in urban Brazil. Part three continues the story of Dona Hilda by exploring the middle-class spectral images that come into being as she transitioned from the hills to the asphalt. And part four develops the concept of bottom-up condominization, foregrounding how, in the wake of the move, the middle-class sensorial of housing beneficiaries increasingly came to hinge on experiments with the materiality and infrastructure of walling practices. In conclusion, I reflect about the future of the Brazilian new middle-class project in today's uncertain political and economic climate.

2. GOVERNING THE POST-NEOLIBERAL HOME

Although unique in its scale and scope, MCMV blended in as the continuation of a longstanding tradition of social and economic policies targeting Brazil's persistent housing deficit. When the Workers' Party took power in 2003, it simultaneously prioritized pro-poor politics and large-scale financial investments, creating the fiscal and political environment for the financialization of poverty. Low-interest credit instruments, facilitated bank services, and various subsidies —such as tax cuts for cars and household appliances— aimed at “leveraging economic development” (Müller, 2014: 193) particularly benefitted the bottom of the pyramid. This incipient redistributive politics (Paes de Barros, Foguel and Ulyssea, 2007) was led by *Bolsa Família*, the country's conditional cash transfer program, acknowledged worldwide as a pioneering instrument of social policy that entrusts the poor with monthly money transfers.

Yet no other public policy of this time epitomizes the gains of political and economic development and combined large- and small-scale interventionism more clearly than MCMV. Launched in 2009, toward the end of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's second presidential term, the housing program promised to create millions of jobs in the civil construction industry at a time when Brazil was looking to expand its domestic consumption market to counteract the devastating effects of the international crisis. MCMV was divided into three income brackets, the lowest being dedicated to families earning up to three minimum monthly wages (some US\$ 650). This category initially received 14,5 billion dollars in funding (approximately 2% of Brazil's GDP for 2009) to construct 1 million housing units. During the presidential administrations of Dilma Rousseff (2010-2016), MCMV saw a threefold expansion in investments and the addition of a new income bracket, with the government rolling out the second and third phases of the program —in 2011 and 2016, respectively—. By the end of 2016, 4 million families had been granted mortgages with monthly payments that amounted to only 5% of their domestic income (some 33 dollars back in 2009).

Despite having been recently defunded², MCMV's sheer scale helped revamp the construction industry, which had boomed in previous years but was beginning to plummet in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. In its lowest income bracket, the program issued mortgages with subsidies estimated at up to 81% of the total property cost. Due to the social nature of the program, each beneficiary was granted a 10-year-long mortgage contract with monthly payments of up to 5% of their domestic income (about US\$ 33,4 a month). While the newly created Ministry of Cities administered the program at the national level, the implementation of housing benefits and the selection of beneficiaries were performed by municipal housing authorities.

MCMV was launched at the pinnacle of this new structure of governance. It perfected previous housing policy instruments and benefitted from industrial-scale constructive techniques to lower operational costs and attend to the demands of "popular classes" (Kopper, 2016). Traveling through the local arms of the state, MCMV superseded previous municipal housing initiatives and elicited new bureaucratic routines for documenting, monitoring, and engaging the poor's hope for homeownership. To promote state accountability and transparency, direct channels between the government and housing movements were crafted, encouraging potential beneficiaries to partake in bottom-up grassroots politics.

MCMV was designed as a public-private partnership in which the market was in charge of supplying units while the state acted in a mediating capacity³. On the one hand, MCMV reproduced some of the tenets of large-scale, financialized public housing production, in which the state provides economic advantages to constructors (such as tax cuts and flexible credit), oversees the execution of contracts, and selects beneficiaries based on income (Rolnik, 2015). As a result, experts contend that projects ended up replicating some of the core deficiencies already seen in previous initiatives, including the lack of comprehensive urban planning and policy integration. This is reflected in the abundance of low-quality, large-scale housing projects erected in segregated areas through low-skilled and cheap labor (Bonduki, 2009; Botega, 2008; Nascimento and Tostes, 2011; Shimbo, 2012).

On the other hand, MCMV yoked diverse societal interests around the promises of basic infrastructure and relied heavily on the idea that poverty could be governed by bringing the state and the market together to give the poor access to affordable homes. Brazil could transform into a democracy of middle-class citizen-consumers as the poor became first-time homeowners. For the first time, the poor and the financialization of their lives were seen

² Once conceived as the pinnacle of the PT government, MCMV arrived in 2023 with significant cuts in funding and coverage. Between 2009 and 2013, 80% of available resources went to the program's lowest income bracket: families earning up to three monthly minimum wages. However, this equation began to shift in 2014. Government subsidies began targeting brackets two and three, which only provide low-income customers with better interest rates rather than public housing subsidies and are thus markedly less costly to public coffers. Notably, by the end of 2019, no new housing units in bracket one had been contracted by the Bolsonaro administration. MCMV was superseded by *Casa Verde e Amarela* in August 2020, a program that replaced housing subsidies with new financial instruments for housing improvements and a wider range of housing schemes beyond the construction and expansion of the housing stock, such as legal tools for land regularization.

³ Constructors had to follow basic guidelines defined by *Caixa Econômica Federal*, Brazil largest public bank, in charge of upholding endorsements, financing contractors, and issuing mortgages. These norms established, for example, that apartments must consist of standardized, two-bedroom, thirty-nine-square-meter units. Therefore, constructors had limited creative autonomy to define the architectural blueprints of projects. At the same time, they benefitted from more flexible (environmental and legal) regulation designed specifically to expedite the approval MCMV developments at the municipalities.

as the key to national economic development and political integration. At the peak of this sociopolitical drama involving local organizations, financial institutions, government branches, and the poor themselves, MCMV presented itself as an attempt to break with the neoliberal policy prescriptions of localized, fitful, and purely market-driven initiatives of the past⁴.

MCMV did indeed move beyond the dismal neoliberal state insofar as “the market, while critical, is not the sole dimension shaping governmental reason” (Biehl, 2016: 439). By juxtaposing specific social and financial logics that enacted their own redistributive effects (Ferguson, 2015), MCMV created a particular kind of *market circuit within capitalism* that promoted real estate profitability, financial capital, and social inclusion. Sociologist Viviana Zelizer (2005) notes that a market circuit carries specific socioeconomic qualities that differentiate it from other circuits and facilitates the exchange of practices, information, obligations, rights, and symbols among its members. Above all, the notion of circuit allows us to see fine-grained contrasts within capitalist societies, foregrounding the range of social ties, relational work, and productive interchanges that accompany economic transactions within and beyond the circuit's purview.

Similarly, although at a much broader national level, MCMV generated unique opportunity structures for the poor to stake their citizenship claims to housing while also promoting a market-friendly environment to achieve those rights. MCMV did so, first, by prioritizing female heads-of-household, the elderly, the disabled, and families living in informal areas deemed unsuitable for habitation; second, by creating its own exchange media, with special interest rates and credit conditions otherwise inaccessible to the poor; and third, by equipping participants in this circuit—both mortgage bearers and constructors—with the tools to act in the economy at large on new terms.

Thus, post-neoliberal policies such as MCMV in Brazil combined new decentralized state bureaucracies and governmental credit provision through various political and economic mediations that sought to transcend the conventional neoliberal prescriptions of the Washington Consensus (Ruckert, Macdonald and Proulx, 2017). By enacting its own redistributive politics while also serving political and economic interests, MCMV consolidated a new moment in Brazil's welfare, one which rebranded the poor as stakeholders and summoned them to act as hybrids of citizen-consumers. Born out of the blurry interfaces of socially inclusive markets and the state, citizen-consumers became both activists of their right for housing and participants in the construction and marketization of real estate, all the while pursuing their ideals of the good life.

3. MIDDLE-CLASS SENSORIAL

When I began fieldwork with Codespa in late 2012, the association was already enlisting over 600 families to mobilize for housing. At first, the structure of governance introduced

⁴ It is important to stress here that the political and economic roles fulfilled by MCMV varied over time. In 2009, in the aftermath of the international crisis, MCMV chiefly served to create jobs in the civil construction industry and to encourage domestic consumption. As the program matured under the first administration of Dilma Rousseff (PT, 2010-2014), it also became known as a powerful anti-poverty mechanism. However, Brazil's economic growth and government spending were forestalled by the end of the commodity boom cycle of the mid-2010s, which forced cuts in most of PT's social programs, including the MCMV.

by Codespa seemed similar to previous efforts to resettle the poor through winning their political cooperation. However, over time Codespa evolved into the city's largest popular housing organization, harnessing a good part of the 2.000 MCMV units constructed in Porto Alegre and articulating an intricate network of partnerships with the government and the market. Many of these families originated from different informal slums adjacent to a neighborhood called Partenon. In Porto Alegre, these densely populated pockets of poverty are known as "vilas". With a history of autoconstruction, piecemeal urbanization, and precarious infrastructures similar to *favelas*, *vilas* have given form to self-sufficient and relatively isolated neighborhoods. Over the years, they have become the object of several intervention programs ranging from public health to housing.

While *vila* inhabitants refer to each other by the expression "vileiros", it has also been taken up as a derogatory term by residents of housing projects and middle-class neighborhoods in attempts to disqualify their way of life. As poverty rates dwindled in the early 2010s, public clashes between *vileiros* and traditional middle-class demographics became ever more overt and recurrent. The rising poor, extolled to be part of the country's burgeoning new middle-class, gained access to consumer markets and began frequenting spaces, such as shopping malls and airports that were conventionally only occupied by the middle-class. These tensions culminated in 2014 in a series of large-scale flashmob-style gatherings organized through social media, called *rolezinhos* (De Faria and Kopper, 2017).

Partenon became the hotbed of this early-21st-century drama of socioeconomic inclusion of the poor in Porto Alegre. During the nineteenth-century, the neighborhood had been home to the city's literary intelligentsia and host to important state institutions, including mental health clinics, prisons, and the military and police headquarters. Between 1940 and 1980, Partenon grew into a core receptacle of rural migration. Today, the centrally located and socioeconomically mixed neighborhood still preserves much of the architecture and infrastructure of its heydays, with hospitals, leading private universities, and huge supermarket networks all distributed along the city's second-largest avenue, the *Bento Gonçalves Avenue*.

A mountain ridge bisects Partenon into two very distinct social zones: a modernized and fully urbanized middle-class residential area by the asphalt and an informally occupied zone with unfinished shacks and para-legal infrastructure of water and electricity along the slope of the hills. Squatted by thousands of families unable to afford a plot of land in the legal market, these city zones were deemed by the municipality as *áreas de risco* —areas unsuitable for habitation— and *áreas verdes* —environmental conservation zones mapped early on in the city's Master Plan (DEM HAB, 2009)—.

Morro [hilltops] and *asfalto* [asphalt] remain pervasive indexers of class and social inequality in Brazilian cities today. This dichotomy has long characterized the literature on urban development in the country, which points to the conflation of spatial and social differentiation. While reexamining some of these studies (Kopper, 2019), I also noticed the degree to which the governance of hope had always been structural to urban dynamics, shaping patterns of housing occupation and distribution across the city. For example, in dissecting Brazil's politics of the middle-class during the 1970s, anthropologist Gilberto Velho noted that the map of the city is best read as a "social map where people are defined by their place of residence", to the point that "people change social class when they move from one neighborhood to another" (1973: 80).

Conversely, anthropologist Ruth Cardoso chronicled the arts of living of low-income and informal workers inhabiting “peripheral housing aggregates” and excluded from infrastructural progress, consumerism, and welfare programs during the years of Brazil’s “economic miracle”. As she charted the vocabularies and expressions used by *favela* dwellers to locate themselves in Brazil’s stratification, she discovered that these narratives already contained the *hope* for upward social mobility. “The *favelado* showed us an envelope with an embroidered monogram he had designed for a potential family business. By the mere existence of this envelope, then, the *favelado* is already an entrepreneur. He only lacks the resources to realize his project” (Cardoso, 1977: 166).

Similarly, for the context of Porto Alegre, anthropologist Claudia Fonseca (2000) illustrated how the sinuosity of streets —up and down the hills— is an allegory of the precarious living conditions of residents of the slums, “sandwiched between two classes” of subjects and material comfort. “A slight slip uphill means a fall into marginality”, writes the anthropologist; “the *hope* is to ‘move upwards,’ to where wealth lies, to the legitimacy that exists by the asphalt” (ibidem: 48). Whenever possible, social improvements materialized in the upgrading and construction of houses. Although the desire to move closer to the asphalt was there, people stayed put.

Codespa’s collective project of upward mobility from within the premises and promises of public policies complicates this intractable dichotomy between the hills and the asphalt. It calls for a more nuanced conceptual toolset for understanding the contemporary intersections of class and space. “We should drop labels”, I heard Pedro —who is a 35-year-old IT worker and Codespa member— say in 2015. “We don’t need the hills, and we don’t need the asphalt. What matters is not where people come from, but where they want to land, where they *hope* to be”. Both hilltops and asphalt were, in this view, tropes of reference that only contributed to reproducing social and geographical differences. What mattered most to Pedro were the connectors *between* hilltops and asphalt: the desire for movement and dislocation; the vibrant flux of improvement, both individual and collective; the yearning for development and progress; and the move toward simple *hope*: the potent force harbored by each member as they rebuilt their future through the house and its infrastructures.

Pedro sees class eventuating not as a structured hierarchy of fixed positions but as a moving constellation of differences. Consider the following words Pedro spoke about his future in 2015:

I am here today, but I don’t know if I’m gonna be here tomorrow. Up to me, I would be in an even better place. (...) Each of us has a ten-year mortgage: ten years before we move up again. Like a clock, ticking... toward the future.

Pedro’s contrasts to a “better place” bear implicit descriptions of imagined “Others” situated “above” and “below” the speakers. However, these are not abstract positions in a hierarchical stratification system. Instead, they are moving positionalities within an affective, material, and urban geography of forces: the affluent neighborhoods and the impoverished hills; topographies of a “before” and an “after”. The imaginaries associated with these places and the concrete experiences and histories of class they evoke can be understood as a “middle-class sensorial”. A middle-class sensorial summons what cultural geographer Edward Soja (1996) glosses thirdspace, simultaneously a real, imagined, and lived space, “an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical

spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectics of spatiality-historicity-sociality” (p. 57).

A middle-class sensorial is about the ways people encounter to defy the rigidity and verticality of stratification; it is about making sense of the affects generated as people work toward achieving a middle-class status, and it is about recognizing the fragility of such a project of upward mobility—which involves a variety of vectors: up and down, past and present, left and right the social ladder—. Above all, a middle-class sensorial challenges the fixed interjacentcies that separate social groups in urban space, evoking new imagined differentiations that reveal the ontologically interdependent nature of middle-class aspirations (Liechty, 2012).

A middle-class sensorial is about capturing these complex and moving constellations of images, affects, and infrastructures that people use to define what it means to be “in the middle”. It requires us to find points of connection more than points of separation and distinction. It also means that our job as ethnographers of class is less one of finding objective markers of difference but one that reconstructs, in a cartographic way, the images that people link together to construe their sense of belonging to the city and to one’s own future.

4. THE HILLS TRANSFIGURED

With this toolset in mind, let us now return to Dona Hilda’s intriguing disinterest in visiting her old acquaintances and friends in the hills. Dona Hilda first came to Porto Alegre when she was 18 years old, escaping the limitations of rural life and searching for employment and social mobility. During the 1960s, Dona Hilda established herself alongside the slopes of the Partenon neighborhood hill. Many others did the same, and the area quickly became a patchwork of informal and self-constructed shacks. Over the years, Dona Hilda was always on the move. She resided in various makeshift properties in the hills—either through informal rentals or directly by squatting on unfinished construction previously abandoned by the municipality—. She described the improvised quality of her dislocations by the Portuguese word “*enjambrado*”, which means “warped by the action of heat or moisture; bent; deformed; to stand motionless by being out of position; become stuck” (Houaiss, 2009).

Dona Hilda’s efforts closely resemble those of the *bricoleur*, who uses whatever is at hand, recombining elements to create something new (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). Her stopgap solutions reveal a struggle over agency, a tension between giving up, remaining stagnated, and finding new ways for her “arts of practice” (De Certeau, 2011: 43). Dona Hilda’s political affects are forged in the very flux of the ordinary (Stewart, 2007) as she cracks through the stuckness and limitations of endemic poverty.

When Dona Hilda was selected to become a housing beneficiary, after five years of painstaking mobilizations alongside Codespa’s leaders, she had to learn to adapt to a new social and physical environment. She left her old neighborhood behind and moved to a unit with an unobstructed view of the *Bento Gonçalves Avenue*, on the first floor of the building closest to the gate. At *Residencial Bento Gonçalves*, Dona Hilda furnished her apartment with newly purchased appliances, installed metal grilles on her windows, and decorated the interior with colorful curtains. Two years after the move, in 2016, she even spoke about

her desire to purchase a car, which would allow her to visit her extended family without depending on public transportation.

Dona Hilda left her old house with most of its furniture to her cousin, who was in dire need of help as she was wandering and sometimes slept in the streets. Today, she told me, her cousin is a transformed person thanks to Dona Hilda's efforts. She finished her high-school education, takes care of herself, and regularly comes to visit Dona Hilda at the new apartment. "Today, when it rains, I listen to the drops falling outside from my bed instead of the streets", she told Dona Hilda. Dona Hilda, however, has no interest in going back to the old neighborhood and visiting her cousin there. She gets updated regularly about what goes on in the hills, through networks of acquaintances who come and visit her.

In our conversations, Dona Hilda also mentioned relatives who decided to continue residing on the hills, where they had invested years consolidating their houses on informal land. "I'm not coming; I will stay at my house. It is *my house*", one of her sons told her. While she understood and respected their rationale, she worried about the lack of sewerage, pavement, and other basic infrastructure in the hills.

Dona Hilda's examples of relatives showcases that, contrary to what is enshrined by the literature on upward social mobility and middle-class identity formation, the passage "from the hilltops to the asphalt" is not automatically longed by all residents of informal settlements. Throughout fieldwork, I heard the stories of numerous families who withdrew from the housing association because they had settled for staying in the hills —where they could bypass the cost of formalization and, more importantly, give fruition to their alternative desires for hominess, which did not always fit into the narrowly planned architecture of apartments—. For Dona Hilda, however, such stories were also important because they marked a personal transition —a conscious decision to leave the hills behind and risk a new life enveloped in the promises of modernity and inclusion materialized by the asphalt—.

Living in an apartment allowed Dona Hilda to develop new senses of privacy and comfort. As she gazed around, admiring the domestic environment she had crafted, she described emerging senses of comfort through the objects of her new home environment during one of our first conversations in the new apartment, in 2015:

*I don't want anything else.
This is all good.
Why fill up the house?
If one is happy, it doesn't matter what one has.
To eat well,
to drink well,
to sleep well,
it's all that matters.
My bed is right there
—you won't believe it—
I sleep on whichever side I want!
This way, the other way,
it's simply marvelous!
Before, I only had a double bed.
This one is huge!
I lay my pillow in one corner
and can spread myself diagonally.
It's so lovely even to stretch out the linens.*

*I pay for everything on time,
I know how to do things right.
I save all the money I need;
when I receive my pension,
I earmark everything,
so much for this, so much for that,
what's left is mine.
I am not a spendthrift.
To eat well,
to drink well,
to sleep well,
that's all.*

Dona Hilda's startling vision of the good life as a combination of happiness, household consumption, and worthiness left me speechless for some time. As I returned and heard Dona Hilda speak flamboyantly about the incredulity of old neighborhoods who came to visit her in the new apartment and her own disinterest in paying back their visit at the hills, I gained a sense that something more than mere social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) was materializing. The hills had not simply been overthrown by the asphalt in her narration, as in a teleological move from poverty to the middle class. Instead, they shifted meaning as Dona Hilda found a plateau for her hopes for a dignified life. Edward Fischer writes that "striving for the good life involves the arduous work of becoming, of trying to live a life that one deems worthy, becoming the sort of person that one desires" (2014: 2). In Dona Hilda's quest for happiness and wellbeing (Fischer and Benson, 2006; Mathews and Izquierdo, 2009), she had found an endpoint where public and intimate domains reconciled—a place to "rest her bones"—. In the long journey to earn a house, Dona Hilda had put the political, economic, and moral machinery of the housing program to work in the reconstruction of her senses of the good life.

Dona Hilda's transitions between intimate and public scales unveil a vibrant cartography connected through the affective engagements with the materialities of her world. Through these infrastructures, she seamlessly transitioned from the expansive life in the hills to the new constricted and regulated life in the condominium. In this process, former neighbors and relatives who decided to stay (instead of move) remind her of the physical-affective realities she decided to leave behind—and the kind of subject she aimed to become in her new place—. As she articulated images of the good life, she wove together tropes of life in the hills with the images of respectability, dignity, and autonomy she envisaged for herself in the condominium—thus construing a middle-class sensorial that is at once spatial, temporal, aspirational, and deeply ingrained in her intimate senses of belonging—.

5. INSTANTIATING CLASS THROUGH POROUS CONDOMINIZATION

Two years after moving, residents began organizing to devise a plan to install surveillance and intercom infrastructures in the complex. MCMV projects usually come with basic barbed wire fencing the premises. But different from the upper-middle-class fortified enclaves studied twenty years ago by Theresa Caldeira (2000) in the wealthy suburbs of São Paulo, here metal grilles do very little in the way of protection. In fact, they are not intended to safeguard against outside menaces but to work as physical signposts for the communities of sociability

and mutual care that are supposed to follow housing interventions. MCMV projects usually comprise several five-story towers organized side-by-side to encourage internal sociability. They are required by law to include a multi-sport game court, a party saloon, and several facilities, such as plazas and benches, to foster conviviality.

Seu Juliano, 65 years-old, played a critical role in this process. The retired electrician became famous for moving to the construction site in 2013 and residing in a container for months before the condominium was ready for habitation. Living amid the debris, he put together a makeshift office and attended to Codespa members as they called or visited for updates on the construction.

In January 2015, I visited Seu Juliano in his new apartment. Anyone familiar with his crumbling living conditions in the container would have been hard-pressed to recognize the elegantly dressed man standing before me. A comfortable environment, packed with technological objects, emerged in place of sand and debris. Seu Juliano even brought along the stray dog that kept him company at the construction site. The animal was now groomed, leashed, and labeled a "pet" by its owner.

When I met him again in November 2016, he was excited by the promise of security technologies. He had walked from door to door, attempting to convince residents to contribute monthly installments to pay for video doorbells and underground fiber-cable infrastructures. "We have to know who enters and who leaves. There needs to be some control. Otherwise, we don't really have security", he explained.

Over time, however, things proved more complicated. Despite the brand-new garage door with remote activation, ostensive surveillance cameras, and a walkthrough triggered by electronic magnets that were now being individually carried on keychains, many residents failed to participate in the new security regime. In their daily movements, they did not actually use remotes and magnet tags as intended; instead, they expected the gatekeepers to "display their usefulness" by diligently opening and closing the gate after them. "These people", Seu Juliano explained, "used to work as housekeepers and janitors for the rich, and now they want to exercise power to show off their new social status".

Things only began to change when measures were taken to cut costs and change the security company. Residents helped construct a sentry box that would accommodate handpicked security guards in charge of filtering the flow of people and enforcing a separation—both moral and physical—between the inside and the outside of the condominium. Most of these professionals were retired male police officers informally trained by people like Seu Juliano to ensure they met specific standards of responsiveness.

"Before", Seu Juliano added, "the gatekeepers let everybody in. There were no criteria. People smiled from afar, and they pressed the button to open the gate, just to be friendly. That can't happen". Seu Juliano pulled suggestions and admonished security guards based on his own past experiences as a gatekeeper in middle-class residential complexes, exercising his proclaimed right to "demand" (*cobrar*) as an informed citizen-consumer.

In the projects, Seu Juliano envisaged new everyday responsibilities for himself as the owner of a condo. Despite his accruing financial problems that began to mount as Brazil plunged deeper into recession, he saw his role as "proprietário" as one of enforcing collective decisions through a language of informed consumerism while also remaining critical of the condominium's problems.

Seu Juliano learned to eavesdrop on the gatekeepers' conversations from his apartment, using the doorbell phone to call them and hold them accountable for their actions. One day, he overheard gatekeepers calling the project "Carandiru", the name of Latin America's once largest prison. Seu Juliano confronted the company's manager, who undermined the episode as a misunderstanding. "No, it was not. It got to everybody's ears. We are consumers of your services. We are paying you, and you give us defamation in return. Did you not know that we have the right to sue?!" Seu Juliano paused his narrative for a moment, smiled back at me, and lowered his voice. "They were not expecting me to use these fancy little words though...."

From the comfort and privacy of his apartment, Seu Juliano also learned to filter his communication with neighbors through doorbell phones —by avoiding bothersome acquaintances, getting a hold of the building manager, passing on and receiving prank calls—.

Throughout this process, the figure of the private condominium comes to mediate the ways people like Seu Juliano conceive of security, privacy, and conviviality. Trickle down from middle-class high-rises, such technologies are vessels for housing beneficiaries to reimagine space as they move from informal settlements to formalized residential addresses. Peripheral condominiumization, then, results from numerous institutions, policies, and everyday practices: from Seu Juliano's reasoning of what constitutes good practice in richer condominiums to collective action undertaken for maintaining condominium buildings, to the proliferation of services and lower-income markets that now cater to homeowners in peripheral condominiums.

The porosity marshaled by walling technologies also established new layers of temporality between desired and unwanted residents. As I learned in my —at times— tense interactions with gatekeepers, infrastructures can be invested with deep-seated imaginaries of dangerous and unwanted individuals. These imaginaries are brought into action in everyday practices of blocking and releasing, enabling certain kinds of porosities that seek to purge the shadows of residents' troubling pasts in the hills.

However, as I also learned in conversations with security guards and passersby who repeatedly crossed through the gate, the moral distinctions enforced by this orderly aesthetic did not completely prevent bodies from trespassing its enacted physical limits. Chilling stories of covert robberies and undercover drug traffickers running rogue inside the projects continued to circulate in informal conversations as people mobilized to instantiate their visions of the future. Even so, not everyone would promptly acknowledge the existence of unwanted porosities. For many, these were anecdotal rumors that only defamed the condominium's image. They did not do justice to the hard work they had put in to try and control the condominium's borders and enforce symbolic and temporal distinctions. For Seu Juliano and many others, walling technologies were vital in crafting embodied discontinuities both within and beyond the condominium while also holding out the possibility of envisioning technologically mediated urban futures.

Walling, then, are key socio-material assemblies of physical and symbolic barrier through which low-income residents instantiate middle-class sensoriums in Brazilian urban peripheries. These technologies have become critical in the instantiation of new class boundaries and imaginaries. Through the calculated obstacles they enact, people seek to reconstruct a sense of wellbeing within social and institutional environments increasingly experienced as precarious and insecure. In *Residencial Bento Gonçalves*, homeowners sought

to install surveillance and intercom infrastructures following the dramatic deterioration of public safety in Rio Grande do Sul. As other ethnographies of securitization in Latin American cities have shown (Capron, 2019; Villarreal, 2019), the fears of crime and the feelings of (in)security they activate are unequally distributed across the social strata—as are the social, political, and material resources to counteract them—making security a critical nexus of social class in the region. In such a context, condominization actualizes notions of security, privacy, and conviviality by introducing new “authenticating procedures” between residents and outsiders. As residents seek to maintain and improve the value of their private property, we see new forms of political-economic mobilization taking place within the physical and symbolic walls of the housing complex.

6. CONCLUSION

Historical and ethnographic perspectives on the middle class have long emphasized the need for processual and long-term accounts that trace not only structural and local formations, but also consider how these scales intersect in practice. The concept of the middle-class sensorial contributes to these studies by adding ethnographic tools that help chart these histories in Latin America, where middle-class subjectivity often interacts with deep-seated structural and institutional legacies. The case of public housing in Brazil, alongside efforts at building a model community from within the premises and promises of the country's largest-ever housing program, brings to the fore critical dimensions of class belonging, such as space, race, and infrastructure. The specter of the hills and the affective allure of bottom-up condominization, both features I encountered among first-time homeowners during fieldwork, underscore the degree to which middle-class aspirations have become intertwined with both material and semiotic agency. They also reiterate the need for more nuanced and situational accounts capable of fleshing out the tensions and affective dimensions of class belonging in Latin American contexts today.

The porous notions of security, privacy, and conviviality expressed by public housing residents reflect the new articulations of class through infrastructure that I saw gaining traction in post-neoliberal Brazil. In this article, I called attention to the fluidity of middle-class imaginaries among public housing beneficiaries. In line with the relevant scholarship on the region (López and Weinstein, 2012; Parker and Walker, 2012), I argued that middle classes in recent Latin America should not be defined as fixed positionalities “sandwiched” between the poor and the rich, nor should they be seen as precarious sociopolitical realities permanently on the brink of collapse (Jiménez, 1999). Instead, Latin American middle-class formations combine political discursivity, socioeconomic distinction, and material inclusion, giving way to complex subjectivities and lived experiences that foreground the sensorial and spectral qualities of belonging to the “middle”.

Throughout the article, I have foregrounded the situated, material, and affective dimensions implicit in the process of locating oneself within the urban geography, within topographies of consumption, and within new moral repertoires of expression. Model beneficiaries such as Dona Hilda remade their lives, aided by the new material-affective infrastructures of the condominium. Such materialities circumscribed the repertoires of movement of homeowners both physically and symbolically by posing barriers in the forms of walls,

entryways, corridors, and self-contained apartments, thereby limiting the spaces and opportunities for social contact and interaction. However, the condominium also empowered people like Dona Hilda to project new senses of middle-class respectability that transcended the precarious infrastructure and informal invisibility the poor faced in the hills.

By establishing material and affective discontinuities between the hills and the asphalt, the condominium redraws what it means to live in the city and, more broadly, within Brazil's changing social stratification. However, the project of establishing oneself as a middle-class subject is never a *fait accompli* but a continual process of becoming in space and time—a journey of waxing middle-class—. Even as people like Dona Hilda refashion their lives in their new apartments, they continue to deal with the specter of old class positionalities that lurk in the form of curious former neighbors who come to visit and past networks of acquaintances that inform her about the developments of life in the hills. Here and there, remembrances of bygone class interjencies superimpose themselves on novel middle-class identities, overwriting what it means to live by the asphalt. The middle-class sensorial that emerges out of these encounters with past and future tropes of imagination and forms of making and inhabiting space and time is thus better understood as a class spectrality: never fully accomplished, always in the process of becoming (something else).

Through the practices of walling—the conceiving and implementing of new surveillance infrastructures—we see attempts at stabilizing and securing new class imaginaries through efforts at instantiating bottom-up condominization. These practices result from residents mobilizing collectively to lobby with market actors, thus with little state involvement. What is more, bottom-up condominization is associated with elite forms of habitation and implies accepting specific rules and obligations that are meant to ensure greater security and organization compared to “open” informal spaces—and thus against the aesthetics of life in the hills, where spatial contiguity and expansiveness set the tone—. But peripheral condominiums show layers and degrees of porosity that complicate conventional notions of condominiums as fortified enclaves. More than offering spatial enclosure, temporal completion, and neatly integrated infrastructures, bottom-up condominiums evince new forms of political-economic articulation, infrastructural unfinishedness, and social and geographic differentiation. Here, too, the challenge of creating symbolic distinctions through physical discontinuities requires ongoing enforcement, revision, and ingenuity—processes of “normalization” that are frequently met with resistances, impasses, and new challenges—. Just like the middle-class sensorial, the bottom-up condominization that characterizes it posits the need for more nuanced analytical approaches that consider the complex intersections between distinction and inclusion, discourse and affect, symbolic and material belonging at the heart of social mobility.

For the most part, the capacity of beneficiaries of public housing to act on their own futures and establish socioeconomic discontinuities with the hills remains structurally precarious, especially as inequalities continue to soar at the onset of a post-pandemic world. Yet, for a period in Brazil's recent history, the convergence of a politics of hope, political discourses of development, middle-class aspirations, and bottom-up mobilizations for basic rights produced widespread *expectations* of socioeconomic inclusion. Today, in the ruins of post-neoliberalism, homeowners still grapple with dreams of security, privacy, and respectability they once thought attainable through public housing, and the promises of upward social mobility these conjured. It remains to be seen how those hopes will be rebuilt and what new configurations of class will emerge from the ground up in the years to come.

7. REFERENCES

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