

Rethinking House - Rethinking City. São Paulo. Brazil

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Key words: Architecture, Urbanism, Social Housing, Collective Housing.

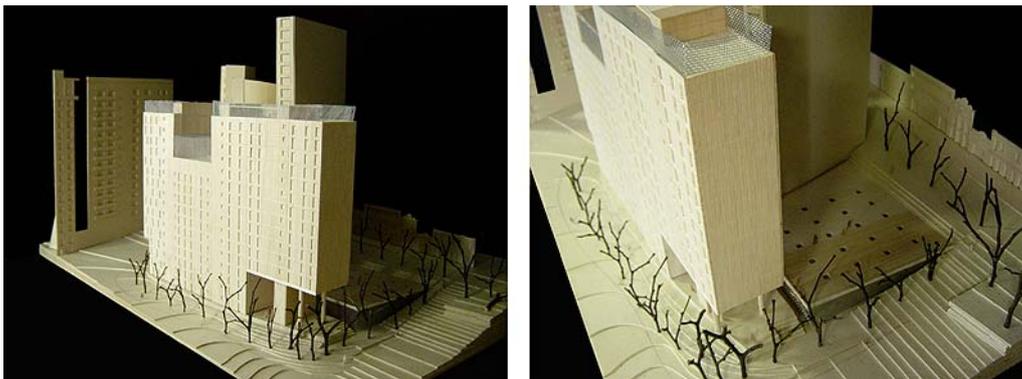
Themes: Social and Cultural aspects of Housing / Design of Housing Environments

Abstract

The text analyzes a proposal of collective habitation in the historical center of the city of São Paulo, designed for low-income inhabitants living in risk areas. The project, awarded with honorable mention in an important recent national competition, has as its main objective to rethink the social interests of collective habitation in the central regions of the great cities. The proposal looks to be an alternative to the traditional policies which are grounded in modernist principles and have been fulfilled in the city through the construction of “mega” housing settlements implanted in the distant peripheries. This solution caused a series of social and infrastructural problems in the city, which are difficult to resolve. The deformity of the center of this metropolis becomes a homogeneous model. However, if the objective is to intensify diversity, the differences must be articulated. This is not meant to add new dissonances, or to try to harmonize elements of conflicting genesis. The proposal looks to articulate the chaos and the generic, from the possibilities of experiences that a metropolis such as São Paulo allows. In the program, 160 habitations of different sizes form the building properly, and it reproduces the functional varieties and space dynamics in the implantation (and in the diversity of the occupation of the surroundings). Its volumes associate the necessities of the implantation, already assigned, the necessities of the units (insulation, ventilation, circulation, etc), and constructive rationality (concentration of the hydraulical areas, modulation, etc.). The openings, ampler than usual ones in buildings of social habitation, are dimensioned in order to provide luminosity and ventilation beyond the visual and space relations with the external environment. The analysis looks to emphasize the innovative aspects of the implantation and the reorganization of the surrounding public space; they represent a new possibility for the transformation of the deteriorated centers of Brazilian cities. The urban renewal of these degraded areas must be opposed to the current trends that promote the gentrification of the central areas and the deepening of social divisions promoted by neoliberal reforms.

1 Introduction

The 20th Century faced the urbanization problem as "constructing peripheries". The crisis in the public dimension of the great contemporary cities is blunt in all levels, equivalent to the social and environmental collapse of those human mega-agglomerations. Since the 90's, several studies present alternative ways to expand the housing sector within consolidated areas of great and medium cities, which would allow for a "re-energizing" of the polis. The Habitasampa competition responds to this perspective - it seeks alternatives to the collective housing problem of São Paulo city. The project we will discuss here was developed for this competition with honor mention award in 2004.



1.1 Program "Living at Downtown"

The Habitasampa competition Assembléia Street is part of diverse programs created by the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) administration of São Paulo city (2000-2004). "Living at Downtown" and "Social Rent" are programs that seek to reverse the gradual demographic decrease taking place in downtown areas for the last thirty years.

Based on a European model, the "Social Rent" program is not well known in Brazil, since the Brazilian government traditionally stimulates housing programs only through mortgage. "Social Rent" wants to reach low income people, of about US\$ 300 per family. Some of these people already live downtown in tenement houses, in precarious constructions and under viaducts. The program was thus created for this population.

Both in downtown and suburban areas, most of the social housing programs promoted by the left wing administration during 2000-2004 looked at solving the problems created by the traditional model of the 60's. These alternatives took into account contemporary experiences that were successful around the world.

1.2 Modern tradition in Brazil, cities and social housing

Between the middle of the 30's and the construction of the Federal Capital in the end of the 50's, modern architecture in Brazil elaborated a language to outline national stereotypes that were applied to the architecture of official palaces of a rather centralized government.

The reflection on the rapid urban transformation and the concern with social housing are exceptions that confirm the general rule of the hegemonic matrix of modern architecture in its Brazilian version.

Big Brazilian cities are an overlapping of vectors of growth directed by the market forces or by the processes of social exclusion, over a fragile base of Luso-colonial occupation. The great interventions carried through since the second half of the 20th century, whose objective was to make possible the

industrial leap, emphasized the road system, that fragmented the precarious fabric of the cities. Based on the modern urbanism's theses, these surgical interventions were not able to organize the functions of the city neither to guarantee the increasing flow of people and merchandises that congested the old streets and avenues. They managed only to destroy the fabric and urban landscape, causing problems of difficult solution. From the end of the Eighties, there were many attempts based on the new trend to revamp the cities and their downtown, aiming to reconstruct that which the modern tradition had destroyed.

The modern intensification in Brazil also did without the heroic concerns with social housing that dominated the architecture of the 20's in Europe. The most remarkable experiences in the modern golden age are the Guinle Park, of Lúcio Costa (1948) – an apartment complex for the elite - and the Pedregulho Complex (1952) – a housing and social infrastructure - whose socio-urban consequences became a disaster proportional to the audacity of its formal solutions.

When the explosion of the great cities transformed the housing problem into an urgent priority, at the end of the 60's, the Brazilian architecture culture had not undergone self-criticism. Excluded the social and urban-architectural discussion, the housing problem became a field for techno-bureaucratic experimentation, as a result of financial plans that tended more to the realtor and construction industry's interests, under the march of the military dictatorship "economic miracle". The result, widely known and criticized, is the housing mega-complexes constructed in the distant city outskirts for thousands of people. Without an adequate infrastructure, or any sense of urbanity and citizenship, these complexes had soon been changed into one of the biggest social problems of the great cities in current days. That is poverty, real estate speculation, violence, ghettos, etc.

In the beginning of 90's, new international issues concern São Paulo city, through attempts to recover city enclaves both at downtown and the peripheries. Some experiences are carried through, that look at reverting the great peripheral complexes trend, still in place today. Carried through by the leftwing PT mayor between 1989 and 1993, important housing projects tried to occupy empty lots closer to downtown, offering fewer units designed as a cultural experience closer to the low income population. Only more recently, however, after eight years of a conservative administration of São Paulo city, a new PT administration (2000-2004) continued a more encompassing vision of the housing problem in the metropolis, with new, different strategies. Even if in a reduced number, these new projects point to a democratization of the urban space, with the encouragement of downtown housing and the construction of important cultural and educational equipment in the poor city outskirts. One of the most important initiatives of this PT administration was the Habitasampa competition.

Also, the 90's staged a structural productive change in São Paulo city. The largest industrial center of the country, while keeping its rank, the city prepared itself to host the largest corporations of the financial sector, in tune with the changes of global economic order. Today, São Paulo is the economic and service center of Brazil, branching throughout South America. This process left evident urban and architectural alterations, in an "unequal and combined" way within the mundialized advanced capitalism.

Thus, São Paulo is not only a tangible, territorial, and formal manifestation. It assimilates and develops with the conscience, common to the large world metropolises, that the unit and identity historically apprehended by architecture comes to an end. This is the portrait of an inexact reality; form and space, in this context, acquire an other, new dimension, coming mainly from the modernization of information systems, basis of the current technological stage, and its potential to transform the daily life. As a consequence, the positions of the architects and city planners in the conceptualization and configuration of the public and private spaces are altered. The drawing and its control by the architect

should not be the goal anymore, thus a strategy or project remains as a norm for the development of the cities. The classic distinction center-periphery is even more complex. On the one hand, the physical limit becomes imprecise, on the other, its differences are amplified on a verge of a chaos.

The issue of low income housing reflects the rapid transformation contemporary metropolises undergoes today. The idea of "model", based on the hope of a utopian world confronts other goals based on the adaptability, changeability, flexibility of principles and generational methods. The inevitable question is: How to interfere in such a scenario to design solutions for the housing spaces of social interest? Our project for the Habitasampa competition intended to get to the bottom of this problem.

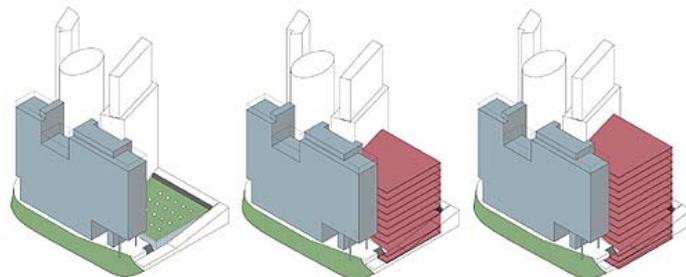


2 Habitasampa Competition

One of the most important attempts to review the issue of social housing in Brazil came through the Habitasampa competition in 2004. Within Brazilian architecture, the originality of this program stimulated the participation of hundreds of professionals across the entire country.

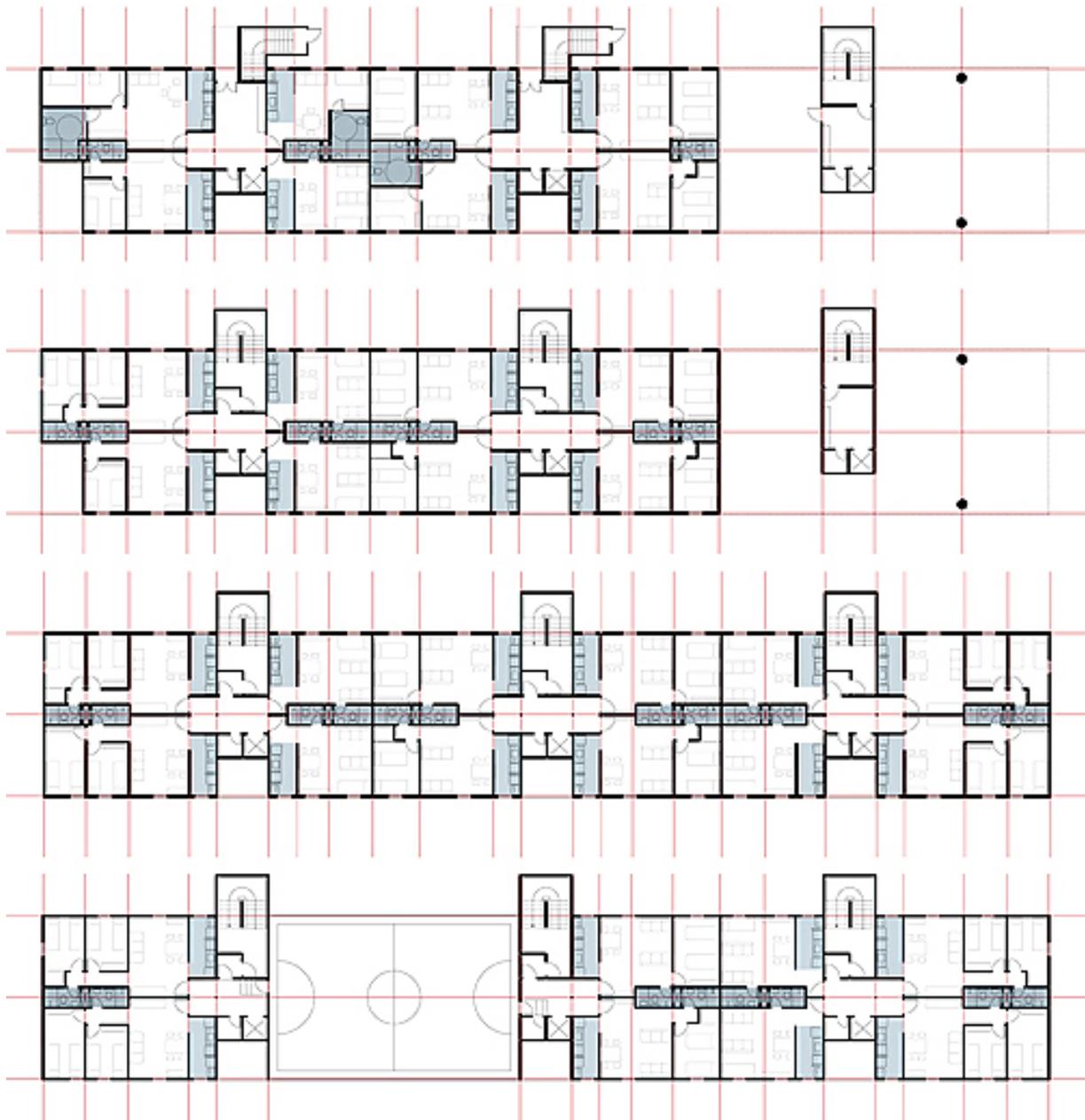
2.1 The two areas of the competition:

- 1) Cônego Vicente Marino – A lot of approximately 9,500 m², bordering the railroad in Barra Funda neighborhood, close to downtown. Two hundred and forty units and a professionalizing center were planned.
- 2) Assembléia Street – A lot at downtown of approximately 2,400 m², close to the historic landmark that houses the metropolitan cathedral. One hundred and sixty units were planned.



2.2 "Habitassampa Assembléia Street"

It is at downtown that the characteristic dissimilarity of São Paulo is more intense. Its deformity becomes a homogeneous model. If the objective is to intensify diversities, the differences must be articulated. This does not mean to add new dissonances, neither try to harmonize elements of conflicting origin. In this site, this interpretation is evident. The proposal articulates the chaos and the generic from the experiences that a metropolis such as São Paulo allows for.



2.3 Implementation

The proposed volume seeks to create a relation of street blocks from the fragmented existing volume to overcome the narrow subjection to the lot. Diversity and city enhance each other to accent and value a place with an already remarkable topography, adding new public spaces, such as squares, sidewalk

and mirantes. The discontinuity of the blade comments on and overlaps the constructed horizon of the place.

The building is not independent from the city; it communicates directly with the street and the block, which starts to be basic for their function. The city is now an extension of the domestic space.

The assigned area for the future Secretaria dos Negócios Jurídicos (SNJ) building and parking lot, requested for immediate use, are incorporated to the general implementation in a set stages. First, the 37 vacancy, semi-buried, parking lot must be constructed. Its cover creates a contiguous square to the Carlos Gomes plaza. It can immediately be extended to 50 vacancies including a mezzanine. Beyond the contest proposal, we suggested that six new levels would be constructed to enlarge the parking capacity in this area to 250 vacancies, thus freeing the surrounding streets and allowing for sidewalk repair and tree replanting.

2.4 Public space

Generous sidewalks are an invitation to collective conviviality. Already in the metropolises, such sidewalks are always under the risk of having their public dimension modified when urban programs, commerce, and services become absent. Such spaces are translated into urban experiences and take advantage of its potentialities. In the case in point, the new square on the parking lot cover would be valued, for the collective space is both a mirante facing the valley and an area of leisure for the residents.

The project suggests, however, that its collective use and space potentialities are incorporated to the new SNJ project, either at the ground level, or on its future cover. From the implementation of the complex and its resulting density, the sidewalk directed toward a residual space on the aggressive road fabric, 23 de maio Avenue, earns a new urban use for the pedestrian.

The existing green area is kept and incorporated to the widened sidewalk, extending and integrating the public areas of the place and exhibiting this unique topography. Such situation is emphatically traced by the frame of the building and by the columns that expose this open space, giving new meaning to the perspective of the valley.

2.5 Collective areas

Some areas of semi-public use were reserved to the residents of the building for leisure, conviviality, meetings, etc. The 12th floor offers access to a collective area protected by a metallic screen that shields the sports and recreation courtyard. The roof-garden has collective use for parties and gatherings.

2.6 Housing

The 160 units of different dimensions proposed by the competition form the building proper. The façade reproduces the functional varieties and space dynamics present on the implementation. Its volume associates the necessities of the implementation, already assigned to fulfill the necessities of the units, i.e. insulation, ventilation, circulation, etc. and the constructive rationality. The openings, ampler than the ones usually planned for social housing projects, had been designed to provide luminosity, ventilation besides visual and space exchange with the exterior environment.

The proposed constructive system (pre-molded panels of concrete and metallic structure) and the organization of the floor (rationalization of the kitchen, sanitary, and circulation areas) result in a fast, clean, and adequately priced construction. The materials used optimize the maintenance and conservation of the building.



2.7 Conclusion

São Paulo, as other brazilian metropolises, represents in its forms and organization consequences of several urban plannings laid on top – which results as a heterogeneous design defined mostly by real state speculation allied to disregard from public administration. The specified place in Habitasampa contest from implanting the residential building is evidentially an extremity in this reality. Buildings from different times and styles, unfinished structures, irregular highs, void spaces etc. To accept, condescendingly, the inherited chaos would be withdrawing from values that supports and basis the discipline. On the other hand, trying to establish a new design from the formally and programmatic control of the site would take us to repeat the same mistakes as ever, historically registered (mainly from Modernism). This proposal intends to revert the process of deterioration through an intervention that defines a new design and program, that considers and collaborates with the site's preexistences – it functions as a strengthen of future actions that may recover the quality of this important urban site.