

How to live together? Assemblage thinking in housing as an open process of city building in Grajaú, São Paulo

An inclusive and adaptive housing scheme for all

Research plan

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Global Housing Graduation

Background

Rapid urbanisation and housing crisis

Contemporary society has been marked by a rapid process of urbanization. By 2050 it is projected that more than two-thirds of the world's population will live in urban areas.¹ However, the process of urbanization unfolds differently in various parts of the world. The nature of human life moving to the cities in the global north is already largely regularized, with policies and infrastructure already well established. In other parts of the world, the process of urbanization often happens uncontrollably, resulting in a lack of adequate housing and people being forced to build their own squatter settlements. This especially holds true for cities in the global south, which not only have to deal with rapid urbanization but also with the complex situation of globalization within which it has to operate.

One of the countries that has experienced rapid urbanization is Brazil, of which over 80% of its population now lives in cities.² At present, more than 12.4 million people live in São Paulo, a number that has doubled since the 1980s and which is

still going up, making it the biggest municipality in Brazil and one of the most populated cities in the world.³ This process of rapid urbanization has several interrelated consequences, such as the growth of slums, insufficient infrastructure, gang violence, and environmental issues.⁴

The rapid growth of the city and its adjustment to urban living has left many of Brazil's poorest behind. Although Brazil is not a poor country social inequality is obvious, as its society has one of the most inequitable distributions of wealth in the world.⁵ In the city of São Paulo, approximately 10% of the population currently lives in some sort of urban precarity, usually associated with various informal living forms, such as cortiços, favelas, or other irregular settlements.⁶ Not only do inadequate living conditions oftentimes trigger the emergence of social, economic, and environmental challenges to those who live there, but also to the whole fabric of the city and its metropolitan extensions.⁷



Fig. 1 Rapid urbanization of São Paulo. (Source: V. Tuca, 2016. from: <https://nextcity.org/features/sao-paulo-housing-crisis-master-plan-zeis-haddad-habitat-iii>. Edited by author).

1. UN World Urbanization Prospects

2. *Urbanization in Brazil: building inclusive & sustainable cities*. (2021). UN Habitat for a Better Urban Future. Retrieved November 15, 2022, from <https://unhabitat.org/brazil>

3. Statista. (2022, July 27). *Largest cities in Brazil by population 2021*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/259227/largest-cities-in-brazil>

4. Project, B. (2020, July 10). *Crossing Streets: Social Divides and Urbanization in Brazil*. The Borgen Project. <https://borgenproject.org/crossing-streets-social-divides-urbanization-brazil/>

5. Brazil itself ranks in the top ten most unequal countries in the world today by income distribution, having a Gini coefficient of 0.53, with São Paulo being no exception to this (World Bank, 2017).

6. Marques, E., & Saraiva, C. (2017). Urban integration or reconfigured inequalities? Analyzing housing precarity in São Paulo, Brazil. *Habitat International*, 69, pp. 18–26.

7. Pimentel Walker, A., & Arquer de Alarcón, M. (2018). The Competing Social and Environmental Functions of Private Urban Land: The Case of an Informal Land Occupation in São Paulo's South Periphery. *Sustainability*, 10(11), 4160.

Problem statement

Segregation in the city of São Paulo

As more than 1.2 million of São Paulo's residents live in inadequate accommodation and a rough 30 thousand citizens live on the streets, the problem is that of inadequate housing.⁸ São Paulo has been largely constructed by its residents, who build not only their own houses but also their neighbourhoods. These auto-constructed homes largely remain legally, materially, or spatially insecure.⁹ Teresa Caldeira calls this process 'peripheral urbanization' and describes modes of the production of space that among other things 'create highly unequal and heterogeneous cities.'¹⁰

A socially segregated society is amongst other things regulated through space. A clear phenomenon that has emerged as a new model for spatial segregation is the fortified enclave, as a way to deal with the fear of violence and to avoid being confronted with the injustice of the country's huge inequality.¹¹ The many material and immaterial boundaries that characterize the city promote strong polarities, such as poor/rich, open/closed, safe/unsafe, modernity/tradition, public/private, and center/margin. Segregation isn't only present between the rich and the

poor. Several projects have been developed in São Paulo since the 90's to solve the housing shortage. Some of them have tried to mitigate the harsh transitions and polarities that so strongly characterize the city, such as Héctor Vigliecca's projects that deal with the notion of the Third Territory as an attempt to consolidate the urban fabric and fight segregation. Unfortunately, despite all good intentions, in most of his projects, residents have added fences to keep people from the neighbouring favelas out, creating solid boundaries and unequal situations even within the same social groups.¹²

In response to the precarious living situations of the urban poor, the city has defined Special Zones of Social Interest (ZEIS) as part of the legal framework The Municipal Strategic Plan (PDE) for the support of sustainable urban development of the city of São Paulo. The ZEIS areas are divided into five categories. In the Grajaú district, which is located in the southern periphery of São Paulo, several territories have been demarcated as ZEIS 1 and ZEIS 4 (ZEIS 1, for occupied land, and ZEIS 4 for vacant land or properties in headwater or environmental protection areas).¹³

With the ZEIS areas, the municipality of São Paulo tried to create a sense of social mix.

The image of São Paulo's response to the inadequate housing situation on such ZEIS 4 areas is the recently built Conjunto Habitacional Chácara do Conde, as part of the Mananciais Program run by São Paulo City Hall. Located in Grajaú, the southern periphery of the city, the project offers apartments to 1289 households in a very efficient way.¹⁴ It complies with the basic needs such as electricity, sewage, running water, and garbage management. However, the project follows a housing scheme based on modernist ideas:

- Monofunctional.
- Homogeneous: in terms of its dwellers.
- Universal architecture: not responding to any of its contexts and no sense of identity.
- Fixed: no room for incrementality and adaptability.
- Exclusive: excluding marginalized groups from its many collective facilities.

Spatial segregation not only influences the social fabric but also the feeling of citizenship in contemporary democratic societies. As people start to question their citizenship and agency, they develop their own rules and regulations. Because public space in high-density cities is highly contested as it is a space of conflicting interests, oftentimes public space is being privatized through corrupt micro-politics. The privatization of public space creates exclusive, non-democratic cities, fragmenting and disrupting the social structure of the city even more. In other words, the binary oppositions that strongly characterize the city of São Paulo in general and Grajaú in particular, bring forth a highly exclusive and undemocratic city.



Fig. 2 Conjunto Habitacional Chácara do Conde on ZEIS 4, Grajaú, with informal settlements in the background. (Source: Arquitetura JAA, 2018. from: <https://arquiteturajaa.com.br/portfolio/chacara-do-conde/>. Edited by author).

8. *The Inequitable Production of Space in São Paulo: Housing Crisis, Social Segregation and Transformative Actions*. (2020, August 16). Global Horizons. <https://globalhorizonsjournal.wordpress.com/portfolio/the-inequitable-production-of-space-in-sao-paulo-housing-crisis-social-segregation-and-transformative-actions/>

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10. Caldeira, T. P. (2016). Peripheral urbanization: Autoconstruction, transversal logics, and politics in cities of the global south. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 35(1), pp. 3-20.

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Theoretical framework

Assemblage thinking

In response to the housing shortage in Europe after the WWII, Heidegger wrote *Bauen, Wohnen, Denken*. Building and dwelling, he writes, although at first the same thing like in the auto-constructed favelas of Grajaú, have become detached in Europe.¹⁵ Although Heidegger is trying to think of ways to reconnect building and dwelling, he still has a way of looking at it in terms of *being-in-the-world*, to be thrown into, embedded, and fixed in the literal, physical, and tangible day-to-day world.¹⁶ What modern architectural thinking extracts from Heidegger's text is the understanding of building and dwelling as abstract forms of being, which is accompanied by a top-down approach that fails to recognize the aspect of people inhabiting space.¹⁷ Modernists like Le Corbusier, have been designing the city in a modernist top-down way, resulting in projects such as Conjunto Habitacional Chácara do Conde, where indeed residents struggle to inhabit the space. As a response to

this approach, Jane Jacobs tried to break the city open from bottom-up with her book *The death and life of great American cities*.¹⁸ Another scholar that has written about this subject more recently is Richard Sennett, asking the question of how to reconnect the *ville* (built environment) with the *cit  * (lived environment) and the formal with the informal. Instead of approaching cities in terms of top-down or bottom-up, in his book *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*, Sennett suggests developing the city as an open process, designing boundaries for a democratic and inclusive public life.¹⁹

Peripheral urbanization, Teresa Caldeira writes, is a process in which citizens and governments interact in complex ways.²⁰ These settlements are neither bottom-up nor top-down, as many simultaneous processes involve a multitude of human and non-human actors. Communities, social movements, and formal institutions all

play key roles in the promotion -or opposition- of inclusive cities. This is what Deleuze calls, assemblage thinking, which is based on the central thesis that people do not act exclusively by themselves but instead rely on complex socio-material interdependencies, exchangeability, fluidity, and their connectivity. Assemblage thinking helps us to speak of housing in a language that transcends the oppressive dichotomy of top-down/bottom-up. It goes beyond binaries and instead looks at the interconnections between different actors, modes of settlement's production, and intersecting desires.²¹ Through assemblage thinking it is recognized that housing and home are always a coproduction of diverse elements, breaking with static, fixed, closed, and essentialist notions of place and replacing the Heideggerian notion of *being-in-the-world*

with the Deleuzian *becoming-in-the-world*.²² Instead of speaking in terms of 'construct' and 'build', it allows us to use the language of 'repair' and 'consolidate'. As Dovey writes, assemblage thinking in architecture '*enables a replacement of binary paradigms such as people + environment with the dynamic inter-connectivity of the socio-spatial assemblage*.'²³

Thinking relationally about housing allows for the awareness of the complexity of existing relationships and enables one to overcome simplistic dichotomies between auto-constructed/planned, top-down/bottom-up, materiality/meaning, form/function, and subject/object. Instead, it sees buildings and cities as embodying twofold concepts by looking at how things become entangled across space and time.

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Fig. 3 Hierarchical or tree thinking versus assemblage or rhizomatic thinking. (Source: Gloushenkova K. and Murray K. n.d. from: <https://www.themantle.com/philosophy/rhizome-american-translation>).

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16. Steiner, G. (1978). *Heidegger*. The Harvester Press Limited, Sussex.

17. Jonas Holst. (2013). Rethinking Dwelling and Building. On Martin Heidegger's conception of Being as Dwelling and J  rn Utzon's Architecture of Well-being. Zarch: *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Architecture and Urbanism*, 2, pp. 52-60.

18. Jacobs, J. (1962). *The death and life of great American cities: the failure of town planning*. Penguin.

19. Sennett, R. (2018). *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City* (First American Edition). Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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Research question

The problem of the exclusive and undemocratic character of the housing crisis in São Paulo brings forth the following research question:

How may assemblage thinking in architectural and urban design contribute to mitigating the harsh transitions and binary oppositions that characterize the urban conditions of Grajaú, São Paulo?

The evocative existing situation is that of the segregated, undemocratic ways of life in Grajaú, São whose urban condition is strongly characterized by binary oppositions. The goal is to promote inclusive and democratic urban spaces and to move into a new paradigm of *becoming-in-the-world*. The method is assemblage thinking in architectural and urban design.

Sub-questions:

- What role can Deleuzian assemblage theory play in architectural and urban design?
- How can assemblage thinking in architectural and urban design enrich the repair and consolidation of urban spaces to improve the segregated and undemocratic ways of life of Grajaú, São Paulo?
- How can we move into the new paradigm of *becoming-in-the-world* through assemblage thinking?

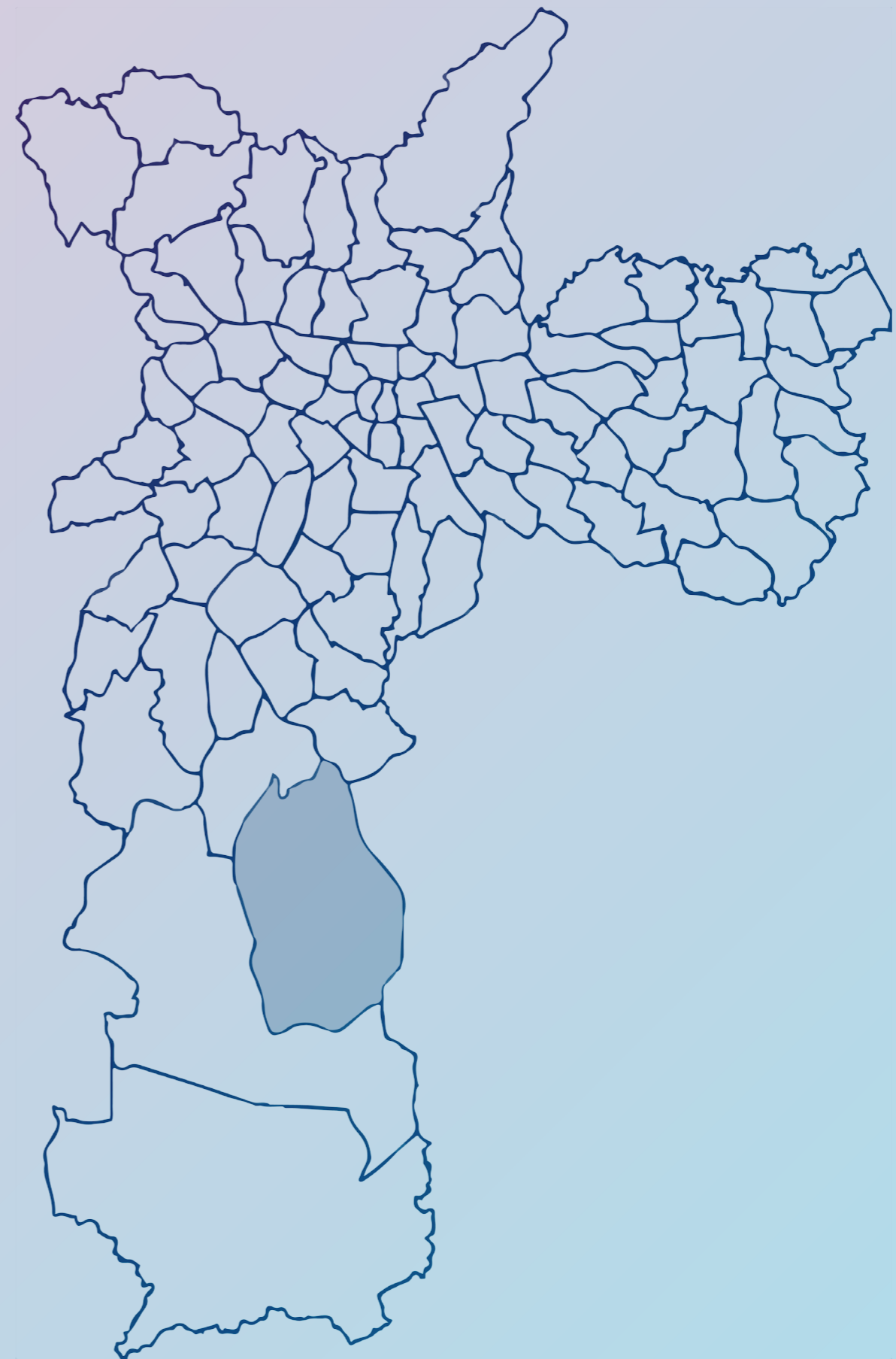


Fig. 4 Grajaú, in the southern periphery of São Paulo. (Source: from <https://nutricionistacarolfaria.com.br/os-dez-distritos-mais-populosos-de-sao-paulo-sp/>. Edited by author).

Methodology and methods

To fully understand the complex situation of Grajaú, São Paulo, I have started the research with a process of fieldwork, including site visits to the ZEIS 4 areas designated as project sites. To get a better understanding of how the city of São Paulo is currently dealing with the issue of social housing, I also visited different social housing case studies throughout the city. Through ethnographic research, I looked at the lived interactions in these sites and projects, which I translated into a travelogue. Photography and video shooting were the main means to register my visits. I also chose the methods of interviews with residents and architectural drawings as part of my methodology, as well as the method of comparative analysis for the case studies, comparing them to different Dutch social housing projects. In the next phase, I will continue doing contextual analysis of the sites, as well as cognitive and typological mapping.

Segregation is not just present in the socio-material realm. Theory has also largely been dominated by segregation, as each discipline stands as an

island on its own. As Gautam Bhan writes: *'across theory and practice, this common sense sits nicely within our hierarchically segmented worlds of sectors, disciplines, and domains.'*²⁴ To overcome this segregation in theory, I want to base my research on the relational approach of assemblage thinking. For the coming months, I intend to continue establishing a theoretical framework concerning the main definitions that guide the project, such as assemblage thinking, *being-in-the-world*, and *becoming-in-the-world*. As I will have a relational approach to this project, I want to draw literature from different disciplines like philosophical inquiry, law, sociology, urban planning theory, economics, and political science as well as informal writings. I intend to continue to read and write to organize the theory in such a way that I can translate the ideas that ground the project into an architectural intervention that promotes the co-existence of heterogeneous elements that characterize the city of São Paulo in general, and Grajaú in particular.

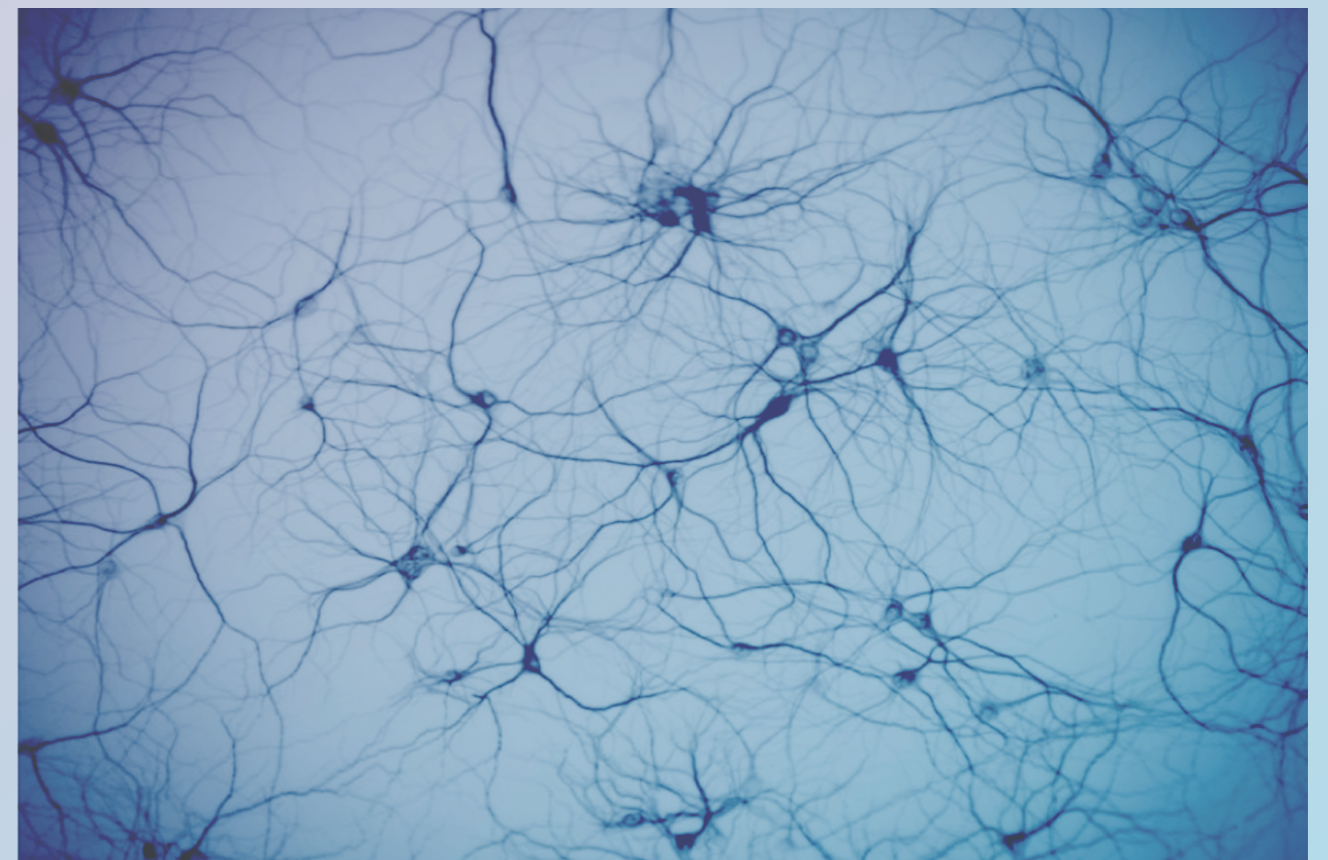


Fig. 5 Relational approach to both practice and theory. (Source: from <https://www.iaacblog.com/programs/rhizome-2/>. Edited by author).

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