



# The (In)-Between

Creating Careful Boundaries and Porous Thresholds  
Between Social Housing and the Grajaú Neighbourhood  
in São Paulo  
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PART 1

# Problem Statement

*How does the current approach towards social housing in São Paulo create boundaries that intensify urban segregation?*



Figure 1: São Paulo Urban Comparison. Source: BOLDARINI ARQUITETOS ASSOCIADOS - Caminho De Ceu Presentation

### 1.1. My House, My Life?

One of the central themes of discussion concerning government housing policies in the Global South is the subject of urban integration. Although each country has a unique situation, the common element that characterises this debate is the urban and social consequences of the deployment of mass housing.<sup>1</sup>

The issue of urban integration is familiar within Brazil. The problem has been enhanced by Brazil's complicated and diverse political history. After the dictatorship's downfall in the 1990s, Brazil adopted a more democratic approach to the housing crisis.<sup>2</sup> In the early 2000s, the *Estatuto da Cidade* (City Statute) was established to tackle the socio-spatial segregation within Brazilian cities. The statute established the *Zones Especias de Interesse Social* (ZEIS, Special Zones of Social Interest) to regulate and legalise informal neighbourhoods and dedicate unused land to social housing.<sup>3</sup> This development was boosted in 2002 when *Partido Dos Trabalhadores* (PT, Worker's Party), led by Lula da Silva, won the national elections.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Eduardo Meireles, Carolina Castro, and Jose Francisco, "My Home, My Life Program and Setbacks for the Integration of Urban Projects: The Study of Case São José do Rio Preto", *The Ideal City Between Myth and Reality. Representations, Policies, Contradictions and Challenges for tomorrow's Urban Life Conference*, Urbino, (August 2015):1-2

2 Silvia Stefani, "Building Mistrust: 'Minha Casa Minha Vida' and its Political Effects in Rio de Janeiro", *Journal of the Society for Latin American Studies*, (2021): 4

3 There are four Zones of Social Interest (ZEIS): ZEIS 1 is areas with existing slum that need to be upgraded, ZEIS 2 is empty public land allocated for social housing, ZEIS 3 is dilapidated central buildings that need to be fixed, and ZEIS 4 is open areas landmarked for social housing for families that will be removed from risk areas.

Freire Santoro, "Urban Planning Instruments For Promoting Social interest Housing: from zoning to obligatory percentages in São Paulo", *Revista Brasileira de Estudos Urbanos e Regionais* 17, no 2: 100-103\

4 Jeff Wallenfeldt, "Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva: President of Brazil", *Britannica*, Last modifies October 31, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Luiz-Inacio-Lula-da-Silva#ref791753>





Figure 2: My House, My Life Project, Source:[https://www.ape11.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/casa\\_verde\\_amarela\\_03](https://www.ape11.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/casa_verde_amarela_03).

However, after the financial crisis of 2008, the Brazilian economy started to crumble, and the Worker's Party redirected the social housing challenges into the Minha Casa, Minha Vida (My House, My Life) program.<sup>5</sup> MCMV aims to build 6.8 million residences, of which 1.7 million have already been realised. According to the Instituto Lula website,

“This is the government providing housing for those in need — while at the same time helping drive commerce and industry, generating jobs and income, turning what was a dream into citizens’ rights, development and dignity.”<sup>6</sup>

However, journalists and researchers often described the program as “a policy of spreadsheets.”<sup>7</sup> The MCMV centralised management made a significant break from previous policies that motivated the involvement of civil society and local municipalities. The program adopted a neoliberal approach that transferred social housing responsibility onto the country’s largest construction firms.<sup>8</sup> Compared to previous approaches, the standards for the location of sites, the construction techniques and the program have dropped, consequently creating mediocre projects that increase the density on the urban periphery.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Stefani, “Building Mistrust,” 5

<sup>6</sup> “Minha Casa Minha Vida”, Last Modified June 8, 2022, <https://www.gov.br/mdr/pt-br/assuntos/habitacao/minha-casa-minha-vida>

<sup>7</sup> “Minha Casa Minha Vida”, Last Modified June 8, 2022, <https://www.gov.br/mdr/pt-br/assuntos/habitacao/minha-casa-minha-vida>

<sup>8</sup> Fernando Serapião, “Linking Formal and Informal: Favela Urbanisation and Social Housing in Sao Paulo,” *Architectural Design* 86, no. 3 (May/June 2016): 79

<sup>9</sup> Stefani, “Building Mistrust,” 8





### 1.2. Chácara do Conde, Grajaú, São Paulo

The article “Building Mistrust: Minha Casa Minha Vida and its Political Effects in Rio de Janeiro” by Silvia Stefani note that the MCMV program’s regard for urban and architectural quality is minimal.<sup>10</sup> To illustrate this, the *Chácara do Conde* project, completed in 2018 in Grajaú, is evaluated.<sup>11</sup>

The project’s site plan tells a story of segregation and disconnect (figure 3). The repetitive linear building blocks strongly contrast the complex and almost organic urban fabric of the surrounding Grajaú area.

Stefani notes how current social housing projects follow the model of fortified enclaves regularly found in wealthier areas of São Paulo. In the article *Fortified Enclaves: The New Urban Segregation* Teresa P. R. Caldeira characterised enclaves as “a new model of spatial segregation.” Caldeira lists design tools that Architects and property developers have developed to achieve this spatial segregation, some of which are present in *Chácara do Conde*. Firstly, physical dividers and empty spaces separate the building from the surrounding public space. Secondly, the building facades have no connection to the public street. Finally, access to the building is limited by decreasing and enclosing entry points (figure 3).

Considering the abovementioned, the motivation for the disconnect between social housing projects and irregular neighbourhoods in São Paulo becomes clearer. Consequently, the boundaries created by the current approach to social housing in São Paulo must be challenged to allow for better urban integration within Grajaú.

<sup>10</sup> Stefani, “Building Mistrust,” 8

<sup>11</sup> *Chácara do Conde*, was initiated by Sao Paulo Municipality’s *Programma Mananciais* (Water Stream Program). Designed by Marcos Carrilho, the project was built to re-house families that were living in risk areas next to the Guarapiranga and Bilings reservoirs. The 104 000.00m<sup>2</sup> plot holds 1289 apartments and houses approximately 5000 inhabitants.

“Chácara do Conde”, JAA Arquitetos, accessed November 10, 2022 <https://arquiteturajaa.com.br/portfolio/chacara-do-conde>

<sup>12</sup> Stefani, “Building Mistrust,” 8

<sup>13</sup> Teresa Caldeira, “Fortified Enclaves: The New Urban Segregation ” 8, (2016): 314-316

Figure 3: *Chácara do Conde* Site Plan, JAA Architects, Source: <https://arquiteturajaa.com.br/portfolio/chacara-do-conde/>





PART 2

# Research Question

*How can careful boundaries and porous thresholds consolidate the connection and co-existence between a new social housing project and the Grajaú neighbourhood?*

Figure 4: *Chácara do Conde*, JAA Architects, Source: <https://arquiteturajaa.com.br/portfolio/chacara-do-conde/>





Figure 5: Carnival on Canvas, Rogerio Reis, Source: <https://www.rogerioreis.com.br/on-canvas>

### 2.1. Careful Boundaries and Porous Thresholds

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a boundary (noun) as “something that indicates or fixes a limit or extent” and links it to words like ‘confine’ and ‘termination.’ By definition, boundaries are tools that exclude and restrict.<sup>14</sup> These words come to mind when considering the connection between social housing (Chácara do Conde ) and the Grajaú neighbourhood. One of the tools that have been used to create porosity within boundaries is thresholds. Architectural researcher Till Boettger notes in his book *Threshold Spaces* that thresholds are spatial conditions that can create openings in boundaries to allow for movement and transition in space.<sup>15</sup>

The online Merriam-Webster Dictionary’s first definition of threshold (noun) is “the plank, stone, or piece of timber that lies under a door.”<sup>16</sup> These physical manifestations of thresholds indicate and influence psychological, emotional, social, and economic territories and borders in the world.<sup>17</sup> To this end, a threshold can also be defined as “the point at which a physiological or psychological effect begins to be produced.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, a bare strip of wood under a door frame can announce and interact with the metaphysical world.

German-Jewish philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin developed the phrase *der Schwellenzauber* (threshold magic), where he often tells the reader about the enchanting effect of thresholds. According to Walter Benjamin, the threshold is a magical zone of

14 Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “boundary,” accessed November 15, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/threshold>

15 Till Boettger, *Threshold Space: Transition in Architecture* (Berlin Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2014): 10-11

16 Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “threshold,” accessed November 15, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/threshold>.

17 Ebru Alakavuk, “Threshold Approaches to Architectural Design Studio”, *SHS Web Conference* 2018: 1-2

18 Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “threshold,” accessed November 15, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/threshold>.

19 Georges Teyssot, “Dream House,” in *A Topology of Everyday Constellations*, ed. Georges Teyssot (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013): 84-90





Figure 6: Carnival on Canvas, Rogerio Reis, Source: <https://www.rogerioreis.com.br/on-canvas>

transition. It is an interval between things in space and time. A medium that allows entry and opens the possibility of being in between two worlds at once.<sup>19</sup>

Brazilian photojournalist Rogerio Reis captures this idea of being in-between worlds in his series *Carnival Na Lona* (Carnival on Canvas). In 1987 Reis decided to abandon Rio's sanctioned Carnival and venture into the streets to capture, what he calls, "the real Carnival." When the project started, Reis documented the name and occupation of every person he photographed. Once, he asked a man dressed as a tree what his profession was, and the man simply answered, "I am a tree!" before walking away. At that moment, the photographer realised that at Carnival, a person's social status or occupation does not matter; what matters is who or what the person is trying to be.<sup>20</sup> Thus, a person's carnival costume is a threshold that allows a person to co-exist between two worlds.

Similarly, the project aims to allow two extremes, irregular and social housing, to co-exist in the same space through porous thresholds (carnival costumes). Subsequently, the designed threshold will aim to create an in-between space that both of the opposing realities can confidently claim.

20 Mariana Vasconcellos, "Showcase: Surreal Selves in Rio," February 16, 2010, <https://archive.nytimes.com/lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/02/16/showcase-123/>

Bas Vroeg and Hripsime Visser, *Oppositions: We are the World, You are the Third World*, (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010 Publishers): 76-77





Figure 7: Carnival on Canvas, Rogerio Reis, Source: <https://www.rogeriorreis.com.br/on-canvas>

PART 3

# Research Methodology



The Research Methodology is a combination of Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Methods.

#### *Literature Review*

Since the field trip was only two weeks, literature sources will be used to ‘fill’ the knowledge gap. Accordingly, dependable essays, journal articles, news articles, and books about the history and development of social housing in Brazil will be used to understand why the current social housing policies and approaches are in place.

The rest of the literature will focus on the implication of porous thresholds and careful boundaries. The literature on thresholds and boundaries will be divided into two sections. Firstly, the general definition and vocabulary associated with the words thresholds and boundary. The second section will focus on existing concepts, applications and experimentations of architectural thresholds and boundaries.

#### *Analysis*

To better understand the pre-existing conditions of social housing in the Grajau neighbourhood, an in-depth group analysis of Chácara do Conde Grajau (2018) will be conducted. The analysis will document the residential building’s materiality, construction methods, unit typologies, typical layouts, facades, GSI,FSI, density and connectivity.

Several case studies that implemented porous thresholds will be analysed and compared. During the analysis, threshold devices will be collected and combined into a “design toolbox.” The toolbox will guide and inspire the design process.

#### *Interviews*

During the field trip, interviews with the residents of Grajau will enable a better understanding of the political and social situations within the neighbourhood. The interviews will significantly contribute towards the development of the research theme.

As part of the Chácara do Conde analysis, the group will have a zoom interview with Secretaria Municipal de Habitacao de Sao Paulo (Municipal Housing Department of Sao Paulo) to verify and discuss the accuracy of the analysis. Furthermore, this interview will also be an opportunity to ask questions about the findings and consequently form a complete understanding of the project—for instance, asking questions about the motivation for using specific materials.

#### *Field Work*

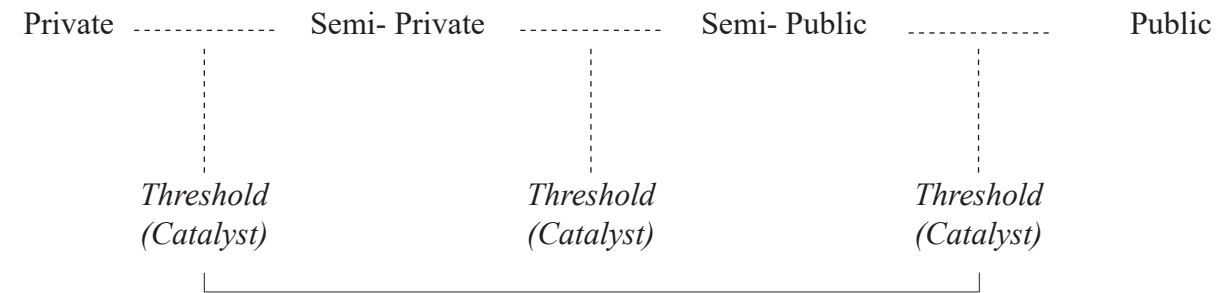
Fieldwork is an intrinsic part of architectural education because it confronts the designer with the existing environments in real life. During the field trip, the physical, social and political conditions of the Grajau neighbourhood will be documented through a series of videos, photographs, sketches and interviews. Furthermore, the group will visit several social housing case studies in Sao Paulo to get a in-person understanding of the spaces.

#### *Definitions*

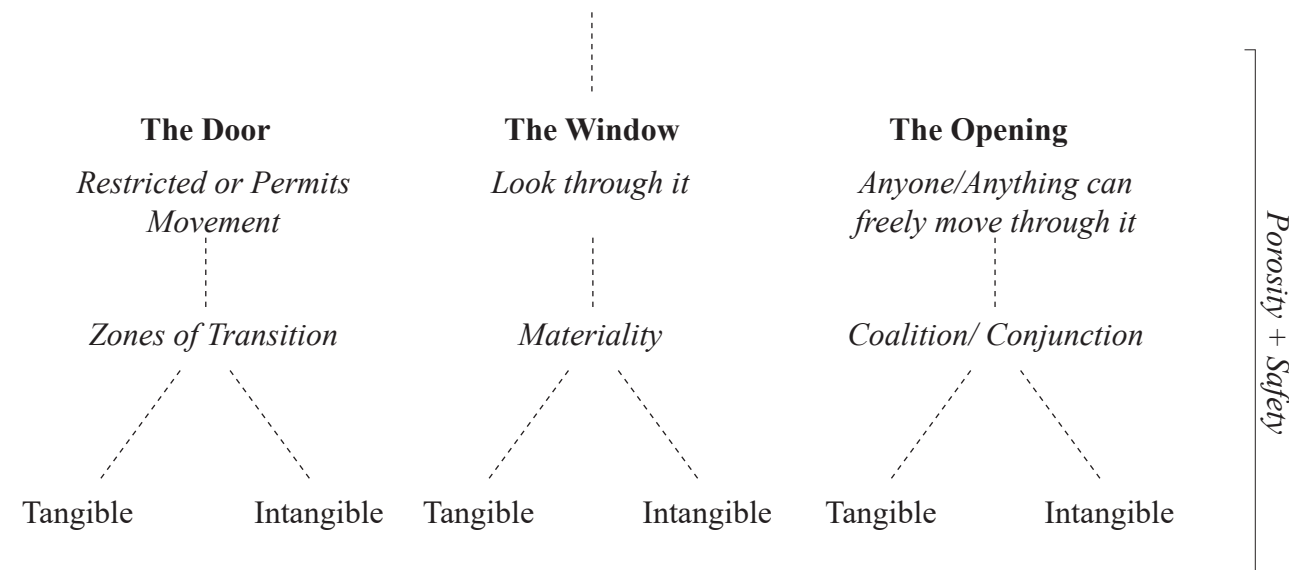
The main problem identified during the research is the transition between public and private. Accordingly, thresholds will be used as catalyst within these transitions space to allow for better urban integration.

Accordingly, the definition of threshold was considered. I noticed that it is connected to words like doorway, portal and window. The quality of each of these thresholds was explored and connected to possible design opportunity. For instance, “The Door” – “Restricts or Permits Movement” – “Zones of Transition”.





Threshold (noun): “the plank, stone, or piece of timber that lies under a door.”  
: “opens the possibility of being in between two worlds at once.”



These different thresholds can be applied between each public to private transition and on different scales, such as “The Urban Door.” This methodology aims to assist in identifying and narrowing in on a more concrete research and design framework.

PART 4

# Theoretical Framework



Due to the limited access to the project site, theoretical information will be a powerful tool for achieving an appropriate design solution. The theoretical framework will be divided into three sections: understanding the context, holistically defining thresholds and boundaries, and gathering various approaches towards porous architectural thresholds and boundaries.

The research will focus on three journal articles to better understand the background and current situation of social housing in Brazil. Firstly, Freire Santoro's article "Urban Planning Instruments For Promoting Social interest Housing: from zoning to obligatory percentages in São Paulo" provides an overview of the government's approach towards creating better urban integration within Sao Paulo. Secondly, Fernando Serapião article "Linking Formal and Informal: Favela Urbanisation and Social Housing in Sao Paulo" is used to understand how the government's approach towards social housing has developed from a social to a more neo-liberal approach (Minha Casa, Minha Vida Program). Moreover, finally, Silvia Stefani's article "Building Mistrust: 'Minha Casa Minha Vida' and its Political Effects in Rio de Janeiro" delves into the effects of the neo-liberalism transformation.

The following section focuses on holistically defining boundaries and thresholds. Since the definitions of these words are so open, the research focuses on Georges Teyssot's book *A Topology of Everyday Constellations*. In the chapter "Dream House", Teyssot provides his understanding of German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin's theory of Threshold Magic (*der Schwellenzauber*). *Der Schwellenzauber* argues that a threshold is a space of transition that allows a being to be in-between places at once. This definition is related to the Brazilian photographer Rogerio Reis's series *Carnival on Canvas*. Reis captures how citizens' carnival costumes become a threshold that creates a co-existence between the person in real life and who or what the person has transformed into for the festivities.

The final part of the theoretical framework focuses on 'collecting' architectural thresholds. The research primarily focuses on the theoretical work of one South American architect, Hector Viglecca (Brazilian) and one European/Western Architect, Aldo van Eyck (Dutch). Hector Viglecca's book *The Third Territory: Collective Housing and the City* will be the pri-

source. The book offers a new perspective on the debate on housing as a social policy. Viglecca describes several devices he used in his projects to better integrate, but not mimic, the building into irregular neighbourhoods. Accordingly, the book will be used to understand better how thresholds in Brazilian social housing have been dealt with in the past. Aldo van Eyck's journal "Thresholds: The Story of an Idea" focuses on implementing thresholds into buildings, especially housing, in the Netherlands. Van Eyck's work will provide insights into a western approach to thresholds and will enrich the material found in Viglecca's book.



PART 5

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