

Room to manoeuvre¹, room to fight: low income access to land and housing in the shadow of the Rio Olympics

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Neoliberal urban development often entails major conflicts between the requirements of capital and those of local citizens, particularly the low income population. This process is exaggerated in rapidly globalizing cities and even more so in hosting major events such as the football World Cup and the Olympics. Here it seems the political consensus for showcasing the city to the outside world and ensuring timely preparations sweeps all objections aside and dislocates many people from their homes in the process.

During the past decade a number of authors have reflected on the transformation of the mode of state regulation and its impact on production of space in Brazil since the end of the military dictatorship in 1985. Accordingly we can note the shift from a 'roll-back' neo-liberal position in the 1990s to one of a 'roll-out' neo-liberal regime with developmental state tendencies in the 2000s to present (Klink, 2013; Klink and Denaldi, 2015; Rolnik, 2013). In terms of urban equity an initial response may be that in such a regulatory framework there is very little space for progressive action. However, the situation may be rather more complicated than a simple initial reading suggests. Indeed as some of its most ardent critics acknowledge, particularly in their 'roll-out' stage and partly in response to persistent market failures, neo-liberal regimes have provided a remarkable capacity for learning, adaptability and evolution involving a range of local institutional reforms including for example partial inclusion of social

¹ Adapted from Michael Safier, undated.

capital approaches (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). What is important for us here is the contextual specificity and path dependency of the outcomes and also the space for application of politics (particularly in terms of urban governance) and local action that can lead to progressive and path-transforming change (Peck, 2010; Peck and Tickell, 2002).

In the context of Brazil we can note extensive re-regulation of state spatial policies, innovative and participatory governance mechanisms and social programmes and institutional development particularly aimed at ameliorating social inequalities including that of low income housing provision and increasing the social function of land and property. Nevertheless, Denaldi (2013) and Klink and Denaldi (2014) have pointed to the contradictory application of these (housing related) programmes (e.g., Minha Casa, Minha Vida (MCMV)) including lack of sufficient attention to the needs of the lowest income groups in terms of both quantity and quality (particularly isolated and peripheral locations) and lack of sufficient leverage on the real estate markets. Rolnik (2013) also argues that in spite of major social achievements during the past decade or so; the political and economic realities of global integration and the drive for creating public private partnerships with major corporations for funding large scale infrastructure and development projects (including the sport mega events) has reinforced the old elite decision making system and hollowed out the democratic and participatory institutions that were created in the 1990s. Following similar sentiments de Souza (2012) notes the ambivalent nature of Brazil's progressive institutions in that they can also be seen as instruments of social control and governmentality.

These criticisms, however valid, do not negate the potential for positive action at the local level particularly in view of the dynamic political scene that has seemingly received a major boost as a result of the emergence of the urban protest movement since June 2013. From a developmental perspective the art is in identifying the opportunities for progressive action and expand them, however limited they may seem. The question then is how have these changes impacted on informal settlements and what scope do they provide (or not as the case may be) for consolidating low income rights to own, use and exchange their land and property?

Utilising in depth field interviews with a range of stakeholders and secondary analysis from a number case studies including informal communities of Vila Autodromo and Providencia we will be examining the possibilities for progressive institutions and action at the local level particularly for fighting eviction and recognising people's rights to the land that they occupy. We argue that institutional reforms of the past 20 years have indeed created the basis for progressive intervention at the local level. However, structural limitations on implementation of these institutions have made them largely subject to fortune of local political conditions and led to patchy and limited results. Nevertheless, Rio's experience also points to the need for a more pluralist and pragmatic perspective since they have defined a baseline in support of community rights and participation at the local level. Consequently they have facilitated local political and organizational mobilization across a range of progressive change agents that at minimum has allowed legal challenges and at best internationalized the resistance to evictions of major events and created new opportunities for identifying and expanding the action space for progressive intervention in a hostile political environment.

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