In Brazil, Connecting Social Housing with the City

By Clarisse Cunha Linke

In 2013 thousands of Brazilians took to the streets to protest, spurred by a small increase in bus fares. However, the root of these demonstrations was not a ten-cent fare change, but a challenge to an urbanization pattern that has been repeating the mistakes of the past: sprawling, isolated ghettos that are impossible to access, service effectively, or provide a connection to the resources and opportunities of the city to the increasingly large numbers of people living in them.

In Brazil rapid economic growth, high-profile international events, and a stated priority of improving mobility in cities has led to unprecedented investments in both public transport and social housing over the past decade. This has, no doubt, improved the lives of many Brazilians, but gaps in housing and transportation planning continue to leave many behind. One of the biggest problems that many poor Brazilians face is simply a lack of access—to work, education, health care, quality food, services and activities, and social networks.

A social housing project in São Paulo provides no amenities and poor access to transit, keeping residents isolated and disconnected from the city.

Minha Casa Minha Vida (MCMV) is a major social housing program launched by President Lula da Silva in 2009 to build a million homes for low-income Brazilians in order to address a major low-income housing shortage amid skyrocketing costs. The program, which translates to "My House My Life," has already delivered more than two million homes, with 1.6 million more under construction. The federal government expects more than twenty-five million people to be covered by the program by 2019. Although the program was justified by a shortage of 5.5 million units in 2009, its initial impetus sprang at least as directly from the need to keep Brazil's economy, employment, and wages stable during the world financial crisis of 2008.

The MCMV program has been effectively delivering affordable housing units in large numbers; however, it has also faced growing criticism for the planning, design, and quality of its end products. In particular, a critical link between affordable housing and access and mobility is missing, since the developments take the form of isolated, housing-only projects on the remote urban periphery. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, 53 percent of MCMV units delivered by 2013 for the lowest income bracket beneficiaries of the program were located in the far West Zone. MCMV projects there are located as many as four hours and multiple paid transfers away from employment and other urban resources.

This is not the first time that social housing has been poorly planned in Brazil. As the country entered the military regime in the 1960s, the creation of the National Housing Bank (BNH) guaranteed a permanent source of funds for mass production. However, repeated cost cutting resulted in low-quality, homogenized, and isolated projects, emphasizing the income disparity in Brazilian cities. Typical examples are Cidade de Deus, Vila Aliança, and Vila Kennedy, the first of Latin America's planned social housing complexes constructed in 1961 in Rio de Janeiro and funded by the Alliance for Progress program developed by U.S. President John Kennedy, which aimed to eradicate favelas while preventing the Cuban revolution from spreading further. Forty thousand houses were built to shelter about thirty residents evicted from favelas. The result

was a doomed effort: between 1970 and 1974 the number of favelas in the cities almost doubled from 162 to 283, providing informal housing solutions born out of residents' need to be closer to work.

With the support of the Ford Foundation and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, in 2014 ITDP Brasil embarked on an investigation into MCMV developments. ITDP wanted to measure the extent of the integration of the developments with commonly understood principles of sustainable urban transportation. We analyzed a set of four case studies in both Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo to better understand the impact on residents. A partner university in the state of Minas Gerais applied the same methodology,

Image: Gabriel Schvarsberg

documenting a case in Uberlândia.

Just as cities must be built for multiple integrated uses, government-sponsored affordable housing should not be conceived in isolation, especially at the scale of the MCMV program, which transforms the social and spatial dynamics of so many urban dwellers. As important to the long-term sustainability of such programs as water, electricity, and sanitation is a well-connected location within the urban perimeter. This includes appropriate infrastructure ranging from a network of safe and welcoming streets

THEME	INDICATOR
1. TRANSPORT	1. Transport options
	2. Transport frequency
2. AVAILABILITY OF EQUIPMENT, COMMERCE, AND SERVICES	3. Daily uses
	4. Occasional uses
	5. Sporadic uses
3. DESIGN AND URBAN INTEGRATION	6. Relation to the surroundings
	7. Block size
	8. Opening to public spaces
	9. Pedestrian circulation network

In order to properly evaluate the MCMV program, ITDP Brazil created an urban evaluation tool. The tool sets minimum quality standards by professionals, developers, and public administrators regarding the best location, implementation, and design of the housing developments and their surrounding areas, in order to create public spaces that promote sociability, pedestrian traffic, and better access to public transportation and equipment, as well as the commerce and services essential to urban life.

The tool was developed in cooperation with the Public Space and Right to the City Research Lab, part of the architecture and urbanism graduate program of the University of São Paulo (LabCidade/USP/FAU, one of the most important entities studying social housing and urban planning in Brazil) and the urban planner and researcher Raquel Rolnik, special rapporteur on adequate housing for the United Nations Human Rights office (2008–2014). Three principles govern the tool: public transport accessibility, accessibility to services, and people-oriented design.

that induce people to walk, cycle, and socialize in the public realm, as well as a rapid and frequent public transport network tightly integrated into the fabric of the city and connecting a constellation of neighborhoods.

In Rio de Janeiro, ITDP worked with the city to develop the Porto Maravilha Social Housing Plan, which benefits from having social housing incorporated in a more central location, particularly for the most disadvantaged households. The plan followed several of ITDP's guidelines for development in the area, focusing on transport access, availability of resources, amenities and services, and more integrated design aspects.

The next step is to scale up this approach nationally. To that end, ITDP has been working with the national secretary of housing and other key partners to revise the MCMV program for its third phase. It is crucial to embed in the program location-based criteria as conditions for project approval and funding, which will result in more sustainable, transparent, merit-based, and social policy–sound funding, helping create just and vibrant cities for all Brazilians.

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