

Architecture for all

A study of 100 years of social housing in Brazil uncovers high-quality projects during the Vargas era

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The Gávea Housing Project in Rio, by Affonso Eduardo Reidy, who also designed the Pedregulho Housing Project in Rio in the early 1950s: social projects of historical and aesthetic significance



While Brazil produced influential, world-renowned architects and architectural landmarks during the twentieth century—Oscar Niemeyer and Brasília being at the top of the list—a large body of work in the area of social housing is less known and lies largely along the margins of official history. However, these works are not invisible or numerically insignificant. They are located in cities throughout Brazil, and their histories form a narrative with breaks, but also with a strong degree of continuity, going through current public policy in addition to creating a valuable repertoire of technical and formal experiments in architecture and urban planning.

The desire to illuminate and catalog the history of social housing in Brazil,

which has existed in this country for just over 100 years (since 1912), led to the preparation of the recently released three-volume book entitled *Os pioneiros da habitação social* (The pioneers of social housing) by Nabil Bonduki, an architect and professor at the University of São Paulo School of Architecture and Urban Planning (USP-FAU) and a São Paulo city councilor who is a member of the Workers' Party (PT). The core of the work, which is found in volume 2, is dedicated to the period stretching from 1930 to 1964, which spans from the time of President Getúlio Vargas' first term to the military coup. "Back then there was a social housing cycle linked to the principles of modern urban planning," says Bonduki.

While the 100-year period of social housing began with a federal govern-



Paquetá housing project in Rio (left), built in 1952, and a building from the early years of Brasília: past attempts to harmonize housing projects and their environments

ment project in Marechal Hermes, a neighborhood in the city of Rio de Janeiro, that managed to complete 165 houses despite the presence of significant opposition, the upcoming Vargas era established a new culture and a different approach. “The idea of the social function of housing was established; the State took on the role of addressing urban issues, and modernism became the language of this new period,” says Bonduki.

ADVANCES AND SETBACKS

Overall, *Os pioneiros da habitação social* addresses both the foundations and practices of a century of Brazilian housing policies and architectural advances and setbacks characteristic of the same period. The work, published jointly by Editora Unesp and Edições Sesc SP, includes 1,208 pages illustrated with photos and figures. Volume 1, *Cem anos de política pública no Brasil* (100 years of public policy in Brazil), recounts and comments on the history of public housing in Brazil. Projects built by social security institutes, which were responsible for public housing during the Vargas era, are addressed at length in the second section. Volume 2, *Inventário da produção pública no Brasil entre 1930 e 1964* (Catalog of public projects in Brazil between 1930 and 1964), coauthored by architect and urban planner Ana Paula Koury, surveys

and documents 322 projects (in 24 states) of the period and includes figures of each on comparative scales. Volume 3, *Onze propostas de morar para o Brasil moderno* (Eleven housing proposals for modern Brazil), examines 11 of these projects in depth and presents three-dimensional models of the original designs and photo essays by Bob Wolfenson.

The basis of this study is rooted in Bonduki’s master’s and PhD research

conducted at FAU, which was submitted in the 1990s and supported by FAPESP, and led to the publication of the book *As origens da habitação social no Brasil* (The origins of social housing in Brazil) published by Estação Liberdade in 1998 and now in its 6th edition. That book explores the transformation of Brazilian cities during the Vargas era. Throughout his research career, Bonduki identified important architectural works built during this period that had rarely been studied previously. His interest in expanding historiography on the topic grew from this observation and focused on “studying Brazilian modern architecture, especially from the 1940s and 1950s, and how it related to social housing.”

The research project spanned 17 years (1997-2013) and was held at USP, initially at the São Carlos School of Engineering and later at FAU. It involved approximately 40 researchers, several of whom eventually carried out their own studies on research topics that arose throughout the process. The key phase of the study involved a complete field survey of social housing production from 1930 to 1964—the second of the three book volumes and the first to be finalized. The two major study projects received support from FAPESP, and the second, conducted after the survey, was selected through a public call for proposals promoted by

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2

Petrobras in the area of cultural heritage and documentation.

The research was carried out in collaboration with Professor Carlos Ferreira Martins, director of the Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning at USP São Carlos (cited on the inner flap of volume 2), and his team. Martins questioned traditional historical approaches to Brazilian modernist architecture, as they excluded certain themes and architects. According to both Martins and Bonduki, the trajectory of “more traditional” architecture, that focuses on housing for the masses, represents historical contributions that are as important as those of established names such as Niemeyer, Lúcio Costa, Rino Levi and Lina Bo Bardi.

Even an architect normally included in this group, Affonso Eduardo Reidy, was not well known for his work on social housing, despite being the designer of projects of great historical and aes-

thetic significance, such as the serpentine Gávea and Pedregulho projects in Rio, which were both inaugurated in the early 1950s. Reidy was married to engineer and theorist Carmen Portinho, another cardinal name in the history of Brazilian social housing. Portinho was director of the Department of Public Housing, which was linked to the office of the mayor of the Federal District (Rio de Janeiro at the time) and which served as one of the few regional agencies that carried out major projects during Vargas’ first term (1937-1945). Later, during Vargas’ second term (1952-1954), Portinho was a member of the Central Board of the Public Housing Foundation.

FORGOTTEN BY HISTORIOGRAPHY

One architect “missing from the dominant historiography,” according to Bonduki, is Carlos Frederico Ferreira, who spent his entire career at the Industrial

Retirement and Pension Institute (IAPI), the public agency that was most prominent in producing housing during the Vargas period. He led the Architecture and Design Sector and, later, the Engineering Division. “I was able to talk to him in 1994, six months before his death. No one knew where he was until I located him in the hills of Nova Friburgo, in the state of Rio de Janeiro,” says Bonduki.

During their conversation, Ferreira defined the IAPI’s central aim as “putting housing units within the reach of the majority of its members with modest salaries, that is, establishing the lowest price without sacrificing necessary hygiene and comfort levels.” This advanced concern was in consonance with the principles established by Swiss architect Le Corbusier in 1933 at the International Congress for Modern Architecture, including, in the words of Bonduki, the

Concentration of housing projects in São Paulo's east side (right) and Iguazu Park, in Curitiba: low quality both in terms of urban planning and architectural design



notion that housing “was not just a living unit,” but also included public spaces such as squares and schools. However, according to the researcher from FAU, this concept encountered considerable resistance in Brazil, beginning in the construction industry. “The issues that had to be addressed were basic, such as a lack of standards for producing a simple brick—whose size depended on the origin—which made it difficult to build large-scale projects,” writes Bonduki.

Another influential architect of this period was Rubens Porto, who was an advisor to the National Labor Council and who established general directives for social security institutes and recommendations on housing project construction. In 1938, Porto published a book that presented a series of solutions for such buildings that involved streamlining all processes, eliminating all superfluous decorations and in turn delivering furnished homes, four-story multifamily buildings with stilts and two-story apartments. In practice, even when not following these precepts, most of projects developed by the institutes followed clear guidelines on urban integration and on the rational and industrial use of materials.

“It’s difficult to pinpoint the existence of a housing policy during the period, but

there were simultaneous actions that fit together,” says Bonduki. “The scenario consisted of several institutes with their own characteristics and teams, trying to ensure modernization and lower costs.” A “specialized techno-bureaucracy” formed together with engineering departments capable of formulating solutions to the challenges of creating low-cost, high-quality popular housing. At a time when today’s construction companies did not exist and when architecture schools were new, these departments acted, according to Bonduki, like “large architectural firms” and “practical laboratories.”

LOW-INCOME POPULATION

According to Bonduki’s study, notable advances in architecture and urban planning and the development of an inspiring legacy did not result in corresponding achievements in low-income family housing access. In the context of a transition from an agrarian society based mainly on the export of agricultural goods to an urban industrial, capitalist era, wherein the government’s role became to protect the worker, private initiatives in the field of housing were discouraged by the Tenant Act of 1942, which froze rents. At

first, the effect was positive for the low-income population, as this significantly decreased the percentage of salaries spent on housing.

However, this situation, combined with intense urbanization throughout Brazil (eight million city dwellers in 1930 grew to 32 million in 1960) led to a shortage of housing, swelling along the city fringes, a lack of public services and a wave of evictions. In short, a serious housing crisis ensued. At the end of this period, social security institutes did not come close to meeting the population’s housing needs, having built only 175,000 units. “The solution for the low-income



Bonduki believes that the government must seriously address land-ownership issues



population was to take construction into their own hands, on the outskirts of large cities, establishing the model we see now,” says Bonduki.

Challenging the notion that Brasília, inaugurated in 1960, was a revolutionary project, Bonduki believes it represented the “end point” of experiments of the 1930s to 1950s, with its superblocks resembling housing projects designed in the 1940s. Additionally, social security institutes played a key role in building these residential areas.

NEW PROGRAMS

From a political point of view, the new capital's inauguration took place during a wave of vitality in the fields of architecture and urban planning, achieved during Vargas' first term. At the end of this period, a proposal called for the unification of social security institutes into a single agency and the transfer of part of its resources to an institution that would be established specifically to meet universal housing needs: the Popular Housing Foundation (FCP). Management teams of the institutes themselves and other sectors of society opposed the change, which would have deprived them of resources and privileges. In turn, the FCP was established without funds and, according to Bonduki, “its failure

set the formulation of a consistent housing policy back by 20 years.”

The plans were resumed soon after the 1964 military coup, when pension funds were abolished upon the creation of the Brazilian Social Pension Institute (INPS, later replaced by the INSS) and National Housing Bank (BNH), which focused on housing construction and financing. It was a second-tier bank, meaning that it worked directly with other banks rather than with the public. It existed until 1986, when it was incorporated into the Federal Savings Bank. However, inaction during the FCP period together with the dismantling of structures by the 1964 coup removed those institutions dedicated to social housing policy that really met the needs of the population. At that time, housing units were sold to future inhabitants and, while there was an emphasis on efficient mass production (4.2 million residences), project quality levels suffered greatly. By the conclusion of the BNH's operations, during the period of redemocratization, the bank was related to ugly and poorly finished buildings.

Beginning in the 1990s, pivotal experiences at the municipal level foreshadowed a series of advances in urban and housing policy, several of which were attributable to popular initiatives. This

was when the Statute of the City of the Ministry of Cities and National Housing Fund was instituted. This framework was auspicious and was strengthened by favorable demographic conditions, such as the diminishing of migration from the countryside to the cities and decline in the rate of population growth.

Political issues, however, led to the 2009 establishment of the My House, My Life federal program, which Bonduki feels is very limited. He stresses the current existence of “a very robust, healthy system of financing and subsidies with its own sources.” However, he affirms that “they tried to tie job creation and economic growth to the housing agenda, without dealing with land-ownership and urban questions, generating contradictory results.” Bonduki forecasts increasing problems related to mobility, safety and the environment as a result. He believes that the government must urgently prioritize quality over quantity as the “pioneers” did and that in order to do this, land-ownership problems must be adequately addressed. ■

Project

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