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**THE INFLUENCE OF LOCAL CULTURAL ASSETS ON THE  
CONCEPTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF URBAN POLICIES, PROGRAMS  
AND PROJECTS IN BRAZIL**

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**Abstract:**

The present paper intends to describe the social and cultural aspects of Brazilian urban crisis and to identify the influences local cultural assets have on the conception and implementation of urban planning policies and slum improvement projects, undertaken recently in the country.

To point out the most important cultural factors which are shaping new ways of dealing with city and regional planning, we will analyse our experiences as consultants for the development of the Municipal Master Plan of the City of Avaré, in the State of São Paulo, and for the elaboration of Urbanistic Propositions for the Master Plans for Espírito Santo State, which includes eleven different counties.

To characterize the distinct strategies applied for the conception of urban slums improvement programs, we will discuss two case studies: the “Favela-Bairro” Program, in Rio de Janeiro and the “Bairro Legal” Project, in São Paulo.

We believe that the particularities of local cultures, which lay behind the ways of thinking our cities and regions, are directly responsible for the conception and implementation of any planning or designing activity in our country. To understand the Brazilian society it is mandatory to study how its territory is being occupied in urban and rural areas, having in mind that the situations analysed cannot be only the planned ones. We must have a deeper look on the informal settlements which presently respond to almost 25% of our cities population.

Since we consider that the built environment is a reflection of the national sociocultural relations we would like to point out that Brazilian local cultural systems and the national character of some of its aspects may help us know a little bit more about the ways of thinking and designing our cities, nowadays.

## 1. Introduction: the Brazilian urban crisis

We are living in our cities as blind citizens. So astonished by the problem effects, we cannot see its origins. This blindness is caused by the very unequal society in which we live in and by the fast growth of our urban population. According to Erminia Maricato, in 1940, Brazilian urban population was 26,3% from total (around 18,8 million people). In 2000, our urban population was 81,2% from total (around 138 million people)<sup>1</sup>.

With the average population increase of 7% per year, without a consistent public housing policy and with an illegitimate urbanistic legislation, shaped to fit strict interests, Brazilian cities have expanded without control. We can observe that situation by examining the data gathered by the Housing and Human Settlements Lab at the School of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of São Paulo (LABHAB/FAUUSP). This institution had estimated the percentage of slum settlements over total population in different cities: Rio de Janeiro, 20%; São Paulo, 22%; Belo Horizonte, 20%; Goiânia, 13,35%; Salvador 30%, Recife, 46%; Fortaleza, 31%<sup>2</sup>.

If we take as example the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, located in the richest region of Brazil, we will see that in the case of São Paulo, we find that almost 60% of the slum settlements are concentrated in the central neighborhoods<sup>3</sup>. In Rio de Janeiro, the slum and informal settlements growth in central areas and the expansion of irregular land parcelling processes in the peripheral neighborhoods are increasing continuously.

To illustrate that, we included some examples in Rio de Janeiro: Cantagalo and Pavão-Pavãozinho communities, situated in Ipanema and Copacabana; the informal land parcelling settlements in the west sector and the irregular occupation in Copacabana. (Figures 1 to 4).

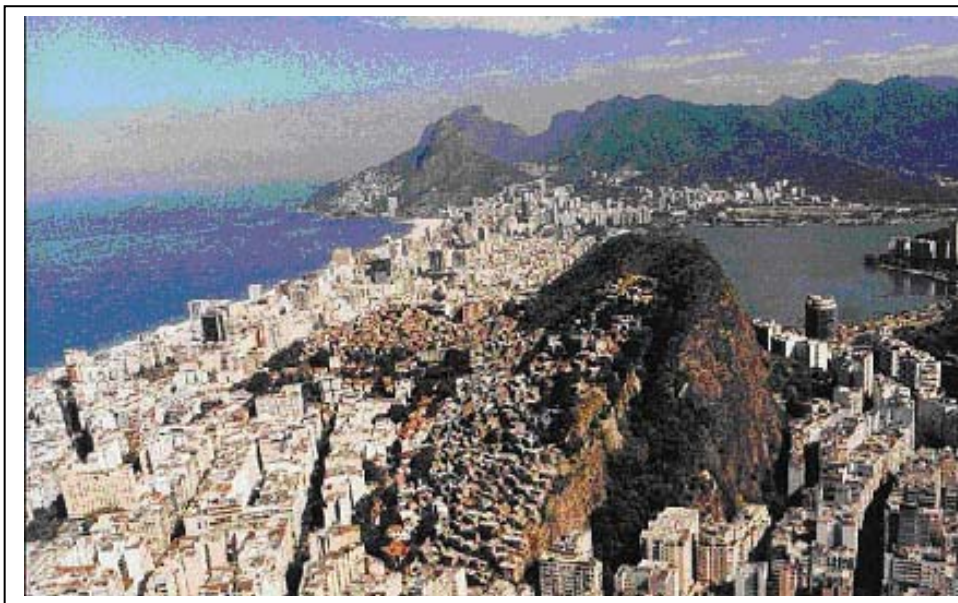


Figure 1- Cantagalo e Pavão- Pavãozinho communities

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<sup>1</sup> MARICATO, Ermínia. **Brasil, cidades: alternativas para a crise urbana**. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> LABHAB/FAUUSP - Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo /Universidade de São Paulo. Data Base is formed by different sources.

<sup>3</sup> GROSTEIN, Marta Dora and MEYER, Regina M. Prosperi. "Os planos diretores e a habitação social nas áreas centrais" in Associação Viva o Centro. **Revista URBS**. São Paulo:, V, no. 25, march/april 2002. p.34-40.



Figure 2 – Informal land parcelling in the West Sector, in Rio de Janeiro



Figures 3 and 4 - Old house occupied in Copacabana  
Pictures by the author

This scenario got worse during the eighties and nineties, due to the economic decay , leading to unemployment and occasional growth, as described by Maricato <sup>4</sup>.

To solve a problem as serious as the ones described above, it is necessary to face it, to understand the causes and consequences, to know the solutions already implemented elsewhere and their results, and, finally, to have a strong opinion about them.

Both in professional as well as in academic practices, there are questions to be posed: how can we change the built environment? what are the responsive ways? are the public housing complexes a solution or a problem? is it right to remove the slum settlements and to neglect all existing efforts, social networks and cultural values?

Reality is demanding to be understood and discussed.

Since we believe that the most of answers come from the public participation and community planning fields, we chose to describe in this paper our own experiences in dealing with the urban question in Brazil.

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<sup>4</sup> MARICATO, Ermínia. **Op.cit.**, p.22.

## 2. The practices of urban planning in Brazil: an historical overview

The promulgation of the federal law ordinance on urban legislation entitled “Estatuto da Cidade” in 2001 was the most recent act on the development of Brazilian urbanistic culture. To understand what this ordinance means in terms of urban planning and community development, it is important to have an historical overview of that process.

Many researchers have studied the subject and gave the theoretical basis for our urban planning practices. Among these, we can point out: Maria Cristina da Silva Leme, from the University of São Paulo<sup>5</sup>; Luiz César de Queiroz Ribeiro, Robert Pechman and Adauto Lúcio Cardoso, from the Institute of Urban and Regional Planning-IPPUR<sup>6</sup>, Marcos Zanetti London, from the Post-Graduate Program in Architecture of the University of Rio de Janeiro<sup>7</sup> and Luiz Carlos Toledo, from the School of Engineering of the State University of Rio de Janeiro-UERJ/RJ<sup>8</sup>.

Based on the publications of Leme, London, Ribeiro e Cardoso, Toledo describes five phases which we may divide our urbanistic history emphasizing the social, cultural and political backgrounds of each one:

### **-the first phase : from 1880 to 1930**

The rural sector was dominant and responsible for the strong political and economic influences which shaped our social elite. The need for railway and maritime transportation to serve the agricultural exportation business was the main reason for investments in our cities and their surroundings. The first professionals involved of the first urban interventions were engineers, graduated from the military schools.

### **-the second phase: from 1930 to 1950**

That period means the transition to broader interventions, varying from plans for sectors of the cities, to connections between sectors and to the whole urban hinterland. In terms of education, urbanism has become a regular course taught in the existing architectural schools, and some of the young professionals were sent to post-graduated studies in Europe.

### **-the third phase: from 1950 a 1964**

The main characteristic was the fast growth and regionalization of our largest cities, as a result from the intense migration from the rural areas to the urban centers, due to industries implementation. As the metropolitan areas were being formed, the first regional planning experiences were launched

The intensity of the urban problems was the reason for new planning methods which included multidisciplinary techniques to face new set of questions. In this context, the Federal Service of

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<sup>5</sup> LEME, Maria Cristina da Silva. “A Formação do Pensamento Urbanístico do Brasil, 1895-1965” in LEME, Maria Cristina da Silva (coord.). **Urbanismo no Brasil, 1895-1965**. São Paulo: FUPAM / Studio Nobel, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> RIBEIRO, Luiz César de Queiroz e CARDOSO, Adauto Lúcio. “Da cidade à nação: gênese e evolução do urbanismo no Brasil” in RIBEIRO, Luiz Cesar de Queiroz and PECHMAN, Robert (orgs.). **Cidade, Povo e Nação. Gênese do Urbanismo Moderno**. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1996;

<sup>7</sup> LONDON, Marcos. **A Circulação de Idéias Urbanísticas no Meio Profissional e Acadêmico: Um Estudo Comparativo entre as Trajetórias de Donat Alfred Agache e Atílio Corrêa Lima**. Master's Dissertation, Rio de Janeiro: UFRJ/FAU-PROARQ, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> TOLEDO, Luiz Carlos. **Algumas notas sobre a formação do pensamento urbanístico no Brasil**. In 1<sup>st</sup> Report-The elaboration of urbanistic propositions for the Região Serrana do Espírito Santo. Rio de Janeiro: Mayerhofer & Toledo, 2005.

Housing and Urbanism (SERFHAU) was created in 1964, designed to establish a national policy for urban planning.

This period is also associated with the project and construction of Brasilia, the new capital, at the same time other new capitals around the world were being planned and built.

#### **-the fourth phase: from 1964 to 1988**

This period was defined by the intensification of urban sprawl, metropolization and low-income areas expansion. In political terms, was characterized by the dictatorial government. In 1966, the National Bank of Housing (BNH) was founded, as a department of SERFHAU, and concentrated the policies of urban and housing development, shaping the directions this development would take in the main metropolitan areas.

Many Master Plans were developed in this period, but community participation and its social interaction were not considered, since these actions were not desired by the public administrations at this time.

After some years of social and political struggle, the dictatorship system was slowly finished and the social pressure coming from urban and community movements led to the promulgation of the new constitution in 1988 indicating the need for public participation as a basis for planning.

#### **-the fifth phase: from 1988 until now**

The importance of the participation process in the urban question has increased, leading to its regulamentation through the federal ordinance No. 10.257 of July, 10 –2001, known as the City Statute (Estatuto da Cidade). According to this ordinance, democratic means through community participation and organization is predicted in all acts dealing with the urban and housing development.

### **3. Two recent experiences with participatory urban and regional planning: the City of Avaré in São Paulo and the interior region of Espírito Santo**

#### **a) the case of Avaré**

We based our methods by considering the full responsibility for the planning activity coming from the municipal administration body, in charge of the Plan procedures and its consequences.

We also indicated that a local commission composed by public and private sectors representatives who would be in charge of the Plan premisses discussions and evaluations, and would be responsible for integrating the community as a whole.

Our methodological assumptions included:

- the training of local representatives from the public and private sectors to undertake the planning activities;
- the establishment of work premisses to deal with sectorial and political integration considering the regional context of Avaré, located under the influence of a State Environmental Preservation Area (APA);
- the constitution of a permanent forum discussion of the problems related to the urban and rural areas, with tourism as a related activity;
- the implementation of a set of significant urban interventions projects and programs, considering potential financing sources.

We were directly responsible for the outline for the Master Plan, to be discussed developed by the local commission.

We ended up with the preliminary contempts which gave basis for the public audiences, including the technical and juridical instructions which were submitted for aproval by the Commons Chamber.

The local commission was in charge of communicating the whole process to the community representatives, managing the final production of the Plan contempts and holding the discussions to take place in the Commons Chamber.

Our work was finished in September of 2004, and by that time, the Master Plan legislation body was finally delivered.

As a result from this experience, we may conclude that the premisses established in the Master Plan Proceedings, developed and discussed with Avaré representatives, can be considered as a social agreement, combining local needs and aspirations and difering from traditional zoning codes. We also believe that the local groups will feel in charge and responsible for their future, since they were included in the whole planning process playing a central role on the deciosn-making process.

### **b) the case of Espírito Santo**

The stablishment of urban propositions for the Master plans of the counties located in Espirito Santo inner side, is being developed according to a previous regional plan made between 2003 and 2004 by the state government. (Figure 5)



Figure 5- Schematic map of the study area in Espirito Santo State  
Made by the author

There are rich resources to be explored such as:

- in terms of public administration: the possibility of formulating integrated policies in three government levels: municipal, state and federal;
- in terms of public participation: the chance to build a professional network among local technicians and the community leaders trained to deal with integrated management;
- in terms of private sector participation: the opportunity to build up financial resources brought by integrated and sustainable development.

One of our goals is to have intense local participation in the decision-making process which will set the planning strategy, ensuring liability and self-control of the Masters Plans results. To achieve that goal, besides the traditional techniques, we developed new methods to ensure participation through socio-dynamic procedures.

In terms of the local commissions coordination, we programmed tasks for two different groups:

- the regional commissions, responsible for surveying, analysing and proposing issues concerning the macro-scale level;
- the local commissions, responsible for specific issues concerning the meso and micro-scale level.

The region is composed by sparse settlements located along the river valleys making the physical connections hard to be done, confirming the initial thesis of a homogeneous geo-morphology with heterogeneous occupation, both in historical and cultural terms.

In this way, it is necessary to enhance regional integration with mixed uses, such as agriculture, tourism, mining and commerce. Since the urbanization degree is low, it is possible to discuss growth trends, land use control and environmental preservation, having in mind strategies to ameliorate the regional integration.

Besides our technical evaluation, developed with the local and regional commissions through workshops and meetings, we set up some techniques to ensure the local communities participation. The methods were developed by the architect Ricardo Florez and were applied in a systematic way, comprising: the Opinions Gathering Method and the Socio-nomic Act<sup>9</sup>.

The Opinions Gathering Method is a methodological tool which seeks to understand the necessary perception, the correct comprehension and priorities, as well as the importance given by subjects discussed in the technical meetings had with each particular group.

The Socio-nomic Act is a methodological tool to work with groups, also known as Psicho-drama. Flores describes it as a search for representation and solution of conflicts, consensus and contradictions. Based on drama techniques, the method combines scenario-making process which is developed and performed by groups and not by individuals.

The application of traditional methods of site surveying, data gathering, diagnosis composition and propositions formulation combined to specific methods designed to increase popular participation are shaping the local profiles each local plan will have for the communities involved.

In this way, we intend to mix the regional and strategic perception with the particular and personal view, where different cultural systems, ethnics, economic activities, urban forms and landscape patterns will respond to local contexts, avoiding the negative aspects of globalization and increasing the benefits of regional unity and integration.

The results are beginning to take place since the local commissions themselves are building up their own data network proposed to be a permanent forum for discussion of local problems and opportunities.<sup>10</sup>

## **4. The housing programs for low income settlements**

### **4.1. An historical overview**

If we look back in our urban history, we will find that the doubts about the ways of planning our cities and regions have followed the public policies implementation during the twentieth century.

If we consider Rio de Janeiro as example, we may find that only in the sixties a first analysis of the urban situation was made by a sociologist, José Arthur Rios, who wrote against the costs of building Brasília<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> FLOREZ, Ricardo. **1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Reports-The elaboration of urbanistic propositions for the Região Serrana do Espírito Santo**. Rio de Janeiro: DIALOG /Mayerhofer & Toledo, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> See site <http://www.domingosmartins.es.gov.br/pdm> made by the Executive Commission of the Master Plan of Domingos Martins/ES.

In 1960, Rios made the first researches about slums in Rio de Janeiro under the orientation of Padre Lebrecht<sup>12</sup>, a Dominican priest who developed research methods as he founded the movement called Economy and Humanism. Rios was in charge of the movement office in Rio and was invited by Governor Carlos Lacerda to head the Social Service Department, where he dealt with slums improvement and urbanization works for two years. When he left, Sandra Cavalcanti, who defended the slums removal, entered the state government as the Secretary of Social Services, in 1963.

When travelling to Rio, in 1968, John Turner visited many housing complexes and slums and in that occasion he made a famous statement: "*They showed me solutions which are problems and problems which are solutions*"<sup>13</sup>. It was the expression defended by a whole generation of urbanists influenced by Turner's thought, helping promoting the idea of urban planning "from bottom-up", based on the people's willingness.

Still back in the dictatorial period (1964-1984), we can observe some "pioneer experiences" which dealt with slums improvement, as the one undertaken by the Quadra team, headed by Carlos Nelson Ferreria dos Santos, in the Brás de Pina neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro, in 1968. This intervention in Brás de Pina was a historical mark for housing policies in this city, since it was a first movement against the slums removal practices, defended by Cavalcanti, as pointed out above.

As described by Freire and Oliveira, Carlos Nelson made an important change in the way the poor people and the slums dwellers were considered, transforming them in subjects, not objects of research, appraising the investments made in their built environment and indicating that they knew what they wanted including priorities and symbolic meanings<sup>14</sup>.

Thus, the idea of slums improvement in opposition of removal is an old one. However, only in the eighties, the concept of slums urbanization was reinforced. In the case of Rio de Janeiro, during the administrations of Governor Leonel Brizola (1982-1986 and 1990-1994), the slums communities were ensured that they would not be removed, and we will see the wooden constructions being replaced by brick and concrete ones.

During that decade, the lack of a consistent housing policy was also a reason for the intense slum areas growth, and the urban legislation, designed for the real state interests, is partly responsible, as already discussed in the first part of this paper.

This idea is well reinforced by Erminia Maricato when she analysed the elitist characteristics of our urban legislation codes, in general<sup>15</sup>. She concluded that the legislation should consider different urban patterns and typologies, in order to respond to different social groups, where land use and

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<sup>11</sup> José Arthur Rios graduated in the first course of Social Sciences in the old National Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Brazil and went for a Master's degree in the USA. He worked in the coordination of the Social Services in under Carlos Lacerda administration. His work in the slums areas made him the first sociologist/researcher in this field.

<sup>12</sup> According to Maria Cristina Leme, In 1956, Lebrecht began his research work in São Paulo, under a contract by Mayor Toledo Pisa. The study is considered a mark in the urban planning practice in this city and in the metropolitan area counties. In LEME, Maria Cristina da Silva. "A Formação do Pensamento Urbanístico do Brasil, 1895-1965" in LEME, Maria Cristina da Silva (coord.). **Urbanismo no Brasil, 1895-1965**. São Paulo: FUPAM / Studio Nobel, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> John Turner was an american architect and urbanist, who developed a research work, during many years, in the *barriadas* of Lima, in Peru, as described in in **Revista Arquitetura**. "Habitação de baixa renda no Brasil: políticas atuais e oportunidades futuras", 1968.

<sup>14</sup> FREIRE, Américo e OLIVEIRA, Lúcia Lippi. **Depoimentos ao CPDOC/FGV: Capítulos da memória do urbanismo carioca**. Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> MARICATO, Ermínia. **Op. Cit.**, p.114.

occupation parameters, open spaces systems, street design ordinances should be established to fit them.

If we consider only the functional and physical aspects, the building typologies found in the public open spaces in the slum settlements, as shown in the examples below, are similar to our old colonial towns, having sometimes the same symbolic value. (Figures 6 and 7)

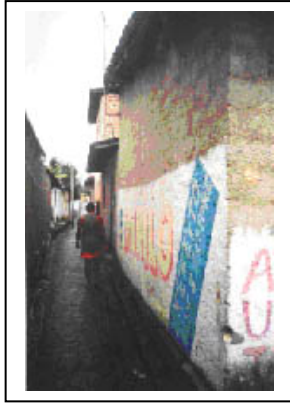


Figure 6- Marechal Deodoro<sup>16</sup>, in Alagoas



Figure 7- Cantagalo<sup>17</sup>, Rio de Janeiro.

Pictures made by the author

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<sup>16</sup> Marechal Deodoro city in Alagoas state, founded in the XVII<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>17</sup> Favela de Cantagalo slum settlement, which began to be built in the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century.

In terms of architectural typologies, we will find the universal language dictated by the modernist models, as shown below. (Figures 8 and 9)



Figures 8 and 9 - Favela do Pavão-Pavãozinho, Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro.  
Pictures made by the author

However, a simple spatial overlook of an informal settlement will not reveal sufficient premisses for intervention proposals. The occupation processes, for instance, follow a physical, historical and cultural trend. Knowing these processes will help understand the symbolic hierarchies and the building capacity of the slum dwellers.

#### 4.1. The Favela-Bairro Program in Rio de Janeiro and the Bairro Legal Project in São Paulo

The analysis of these two different public policies reveals the various ways and philosophies being applied to deal with housing demands and informal settlements in Brazil, by the public sector, in the municipal level. Each of these alternatives have negative and positive aspects and have contradictory characteristics, and have to be analysed in their particular contexts.

In the case of Bairro Legal in São Paulo, the city administration intends to transform the settlements in a formal neighborhood, applying most of the financial resources in infrastructure projects, such as the implementation of water supply, sewage and drainage systems. To achieve that goal, around 40% to 60% of the existing units have to be removed, what is a negative consequence of the intervention. The re-location solutions are not planned and the dwellers, although compensated financially to leave their houses, end up moving to other slum or build new houses in the same area.

In the case of Favela Bairro in Rio de Janeiro, the city administration's perspective is different: there are few changes in the settlements, as only 5% of the housing units can be removed. This makes the infra-structure improvement a hard task to achieve, since the costs are very high.<sup>18</sup>

Another aspect which opposes these two policies, in a contradictory way, is the community participation strategies used. In Bairro Legal, the audiences are vital for the project approval, and for that purpose, three alternative solutions are presented and voted. A percentage of approval is needed to consolidate the choice.

In Favela Bairro Program, we did not experience any serious intention of community participation. In fact, two audiences are held. In the first audience, the problems are superficially discussed and divided according to specific themes, and in the second one, the only project alternative is presented and officially approved.

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<sup>18</sup> The Favela-Bairro Program was conceived according to previous experiences developed by the old Social Development Department of the municipal administration, during the eighties, such as *Projeto Mutirão*. In 1994, the Program was created by the architect Sergio Magalhães, when he was the Housing Department Secretary, and it was designed for interventions in the medium-scale slums, with 500 to 2500 housing units. These slum settlements respond to over 1/3 from total or 60% of the slum population in Rio de Janeiro.

Another aspects we have to consider is the political stance, since avoiding great amount of removal, as seen in the Rio de Janeiro's case, guarantees a perspective of voting percentage, and also the technical quality of the projects. In the case of Favela Bairro Program, the Housing Department sets a very high standards for the data gathering, survey and project design.

We had the opportunity to be consultants for the projects of two slum communities in Rio de Janeiro, enabling us to have a deeper view of these particular realities, confirming some of the assumptions we had about the Favela Bairro Program but also enabling us to analyse the different occupation processes, as exemplified below, for Cantagalo area. (Figure 10)



Figure 10 – Scheme traced to illustrate the occupation process of the area.  
Made by the author

The schemes that follow were drawn as a result of our analysis about the building types developed according to the hilly and rocky soil conditions found in those areas, which led to a set of creative solutions, as the pilotis for example.

Schemes of the occupation process and building alternatives conforming to topography:  
(Figures 11 to 13)

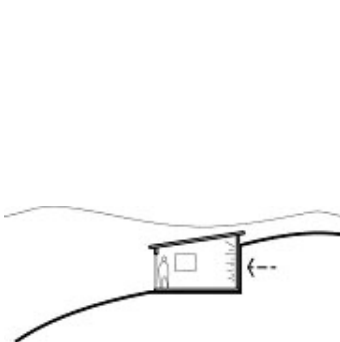


Figure 11 – 1<sup>st</sup> phase

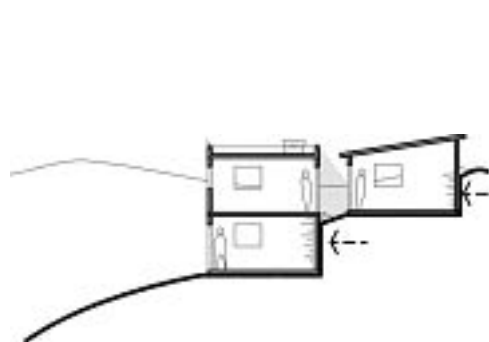


Figure 12 – 2<sup>nd</sup> phase

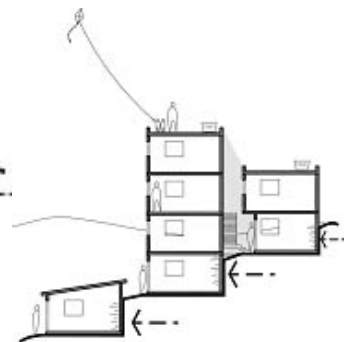


Figure 13 – 3<sup>rd</sup> phase

Schemes of the occupation process and building alternatives in rocky soil:  
(Figures 14 to 16)

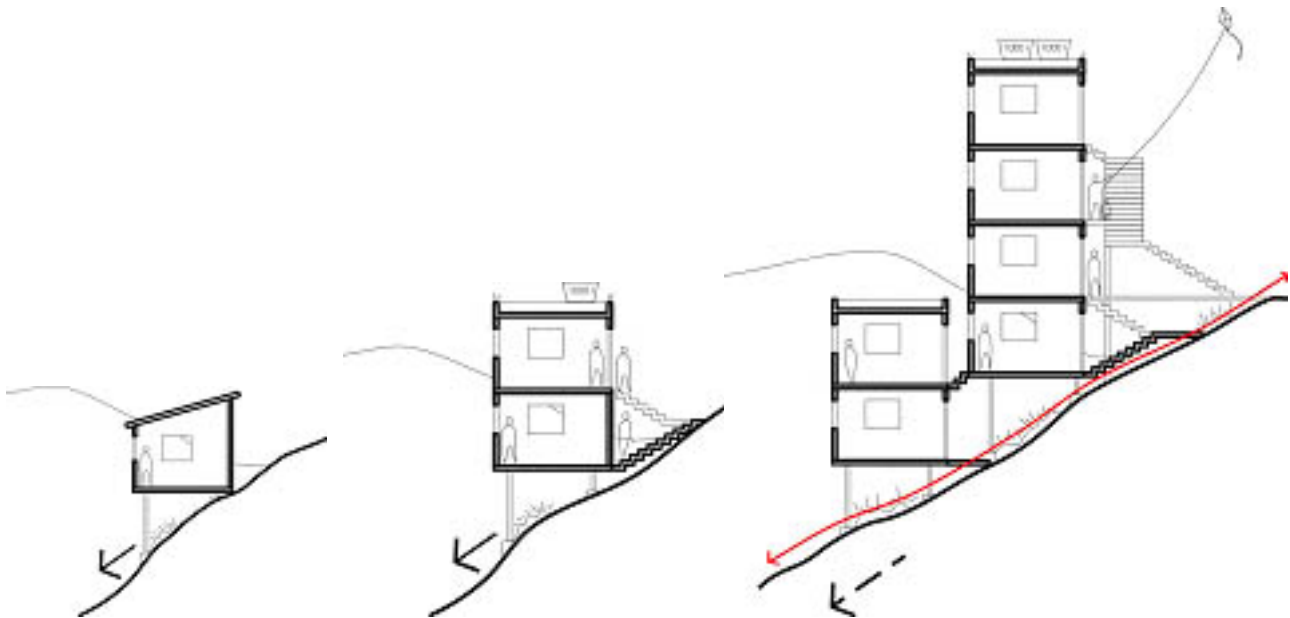


Figure 14 – 1<sup>st</sup> phase

Figure 15 - 2<sup>a</sup> phase

Figure 16 – 3<sup>rd</sup> phase

## 5. Conclusion

Slum settlements, informal land parcelling, irregular occupation of hills and river margins, lack of infrastructure systems and the demand for educational and health assistance services are common aspects of Brazilian cities of any size and scale.

These are not local problems, what reinforces the thesis which relates the built environment to culture and social relations. Housing is not a local issue, since it depends on national territory planning policies.

According to Milton Santos the urban problems are located in the cities but they are not to be considered as an urban question only, since they belong to the rural and urban sides, in local, regional, national and even international scales. To heal the cities, functional solutions by themselves will not lead to deeper only very superficial results<sup>19</sup>.

We may suspect that post-modernist currents which consider the physical urbanization as the ultimate solution to the slum settlements do not want to see and question the real problem behind our urban built environments. This the point of view defended, for instance, by the architect Sergio Magalhães, who conceived the Favela-Bairro Program, and, in a published interview, declared that even though there was an increase of slum dwellers, the slums were improved, showing,

<sup>19</sup> SANTOS, Milton. "Quem tem medo da cidade" in *O país distorcido*, p.125

following his opinion, new and alternative solutions. He pointed out how locally-based physical improvements could provide a better quality of life.<sup>20</sup>

We consider that all informal low income housing settlements are not an aesthetic deformation, and that the solution does not lay on formalistic issues. We believe that any effort made to bring public facilities systems to local communities is a valid one but we do not have the right to believe that this isolated action will change the social conditions.

Along with direct physical interventions, there is a need to aggregate to traditional techniques of planning and design, some more specific methods of social and environmental perception, clarifying their real problems and solutions, and applying in practice more effective ways of achieving participation, cultural expression and decision-making.

We do not have more time, we need to know how to see.

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<sup>20</sup> MAGALHÃES, Sergio. **Sobre a cidade: habitação e democracia no Rio de Janeiro**. São Paulo: ProEditores, 2002. pp.124-135.

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